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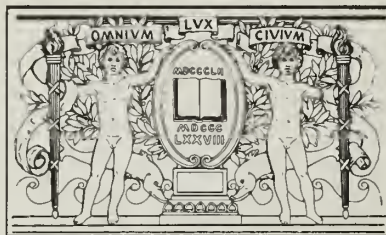
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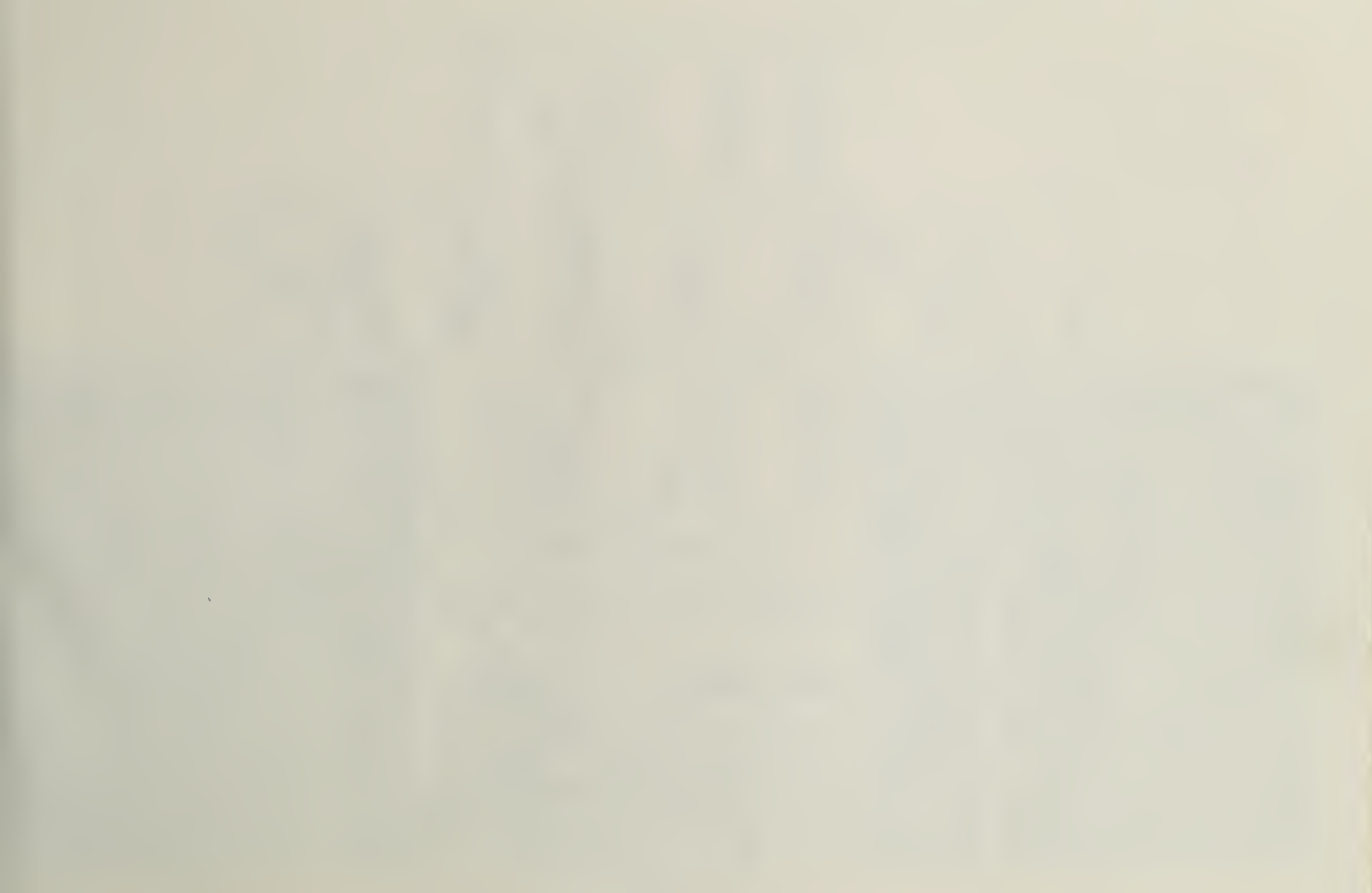


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# NOT SO LONG AGO

**Oral Histories  
of Older Bostonians**  
By Lawrence Elle



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Max Collins. Photo by Lawrence Elle.



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# NOT SO LONG AGO:

## Oral Histories of Older Bostonians

BY LAWRENCE ELLE

Photographs and Photo Research By Jean Boughton

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# NOT SO LONG AGO: Oral Histories of Older Bostonians

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*This book is the result of:*

The Senior Resource Cooperative Project  
of the  
Mayor's Office of Community Schools,  
*Boston, Massachusetts.*

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DESIGNED AND LITHOGRAPHED BY THE  
CITY OF BOSTON •  • PRINTING SECTION

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## About The Author:

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**Lawrence Elle** is a Boston area writer, editor and historian.  
He has published articles in the *Boston Globe*, in scholarly journals and in community newspapers.  
*Not So Long Ago: Oral Histories of Older Bostonians* is his first published book.

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## DEDICATION

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*To those who shared their stories  
and to the generation of  
older Americans they represent*

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# INTRODUCTION

The once vital  
New England shoe industry,  
early 1920s.



The  
Boston Public Library  
Print Department.

NOT SO LONG AGO: ORAL HISTORIES OF OLDER BOSTONIANS is about the life experiences of the generation of Bostonians born between 1895 and 1915. It is an oral history, meaning that what appears in print is from the spoken word. There are two exceptions to this. Those parts of the book where Angela DiChiara appears are taken from her autobiography, and the interview with Helen Morton was a written response to questions I submitted. All other material is based on either personal interviews or group discussions.

The people interviewed were residents of five Boston neighborhoods: Allston-Brighton, Jamaica Plain, the South End, South Boston and West Roxbury. In terms of occupational background and income level, most would be considered working class, though their ethnic and cultural traditions are extremely varied. Overall, they are representative of the ethnic composition of Boston's population in the early 1900s. I have also included elderly who are more recent arrivals from the Caribbean. Photographs of the people interviewed were done by Jean Boughton and for those represented her work gives their presentation an added depth and character. Lastly, in reading the interviews you will find that some of them contain a good deal of straightforward

Boston slang. I decided to leave much of the slang intact as I felt it contributed to the emotional tone and character of the person's speech. The inclusion of slang is in no way meant to disparage the speaker and, as is evident, all the speakers are able to communicate their thoughts quite well.

Before proceeding with the oral histories it will be useful to describe briefly what Boston was like in the early 1900s, the time period when most of the people interviewed were born and growing up. This will provide an historical background against which to view the individual interviews that follow.

I

Boston in the years 1895 to 1915 was perhaps most different from today's Boston in that its population contained an extremely high percentage of foreign born immigrants. In 1910 a full 36 percent of the total city population was born overseas. The situation was even more pronounced among the male population, with 45 percent of those over twenty-one being foreign born. This statistic sounds innocent but when translated into people competing for jobs it meant that for every native-born American applying for work there was nearly one immigrant. Altogether over 70 percent of the Boston population was

foreign stock. This meant that most Bostonians were still heavily immersed in the culture of their parents' homelands, cultures that differed sharply from native Yankee-Protestant culture. The Yankee began to feel like a stranger in his own land. One *Fortune* magazine writer put it this way;

The voices around Faneuil Hall are Italian voices, and the silence of Copp's Hill is a silence of Yankee stones in a screaming of Levantine and Greek and the faces on Washington Street are Irish faces and the only race which remains now what it was when the Old South Church was building is the race of sedate and respectable pigeons which courteously steps aside on the paths of Boston Common to let the Lithuanians pass.<sup>1</sup>

Foreign tongues and customs bred apprehension in Yankee hearts arousing fears that their way of life would be lost as wave upon wave of immigrants flooded America's shores.

The landscape of Boston in 1900 was characterized by what sociologist Herbert Gans called "urban villages." These were ethnic enclaves occupying whole neighborhoods, as the Italians did in the North End, or sharing them as the Irish, Germans, Poles and Albanians did in South Boston. Even today Boston retains some "urban village" features. It remains a city of ethnically identifiable neighborhoods, but while today neighborhood groups organize to preserve their cultural tradition, years ago no such effort was necessary.

In 1900 each ethnic neighborhood was distinct in its stores, schools, churches, customs, even in such matters as family structure and types of emotional expression permitted. Neighborhoods were places of refuge where members of the same nationality or race could find support and acceptance as they struggled with an often hostile environment. In fact, it was the hostility which native-born Americans so frequently showered on newcomers that helped to make immigrant communities so cohesive. For despite Emma Lazarus' fine words; "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," immigrants were never welcomed with open arms. Local and national ruling groups were more inclined to see them as "wretched refuse," valuable as a source of cheap labor for America's rapidly expanding

basic industries, but potentially threatening to their wealth and power. This was also a period when prejudice and racism were respectable public attitudes and Yankee leaders considered Southern Europeans, Jews and Slavs to be racially and culturally inferior. All the stereotypes that are hauled out today to attack minorities were first used by native whites to attack other whites. Immigrants were dirty, lazy, sexually promiscuous, prone to violence and the servants of "rum and Romanism." Critics could usually produce a raft of statistics to buttress their chauvinism and indeed, immigrants did commit more crimes, did live in crowded hovels and immigrant fathers did desert their families more often than their affluent Anglo-American counterparts. To thwart this contagion, Yankees urged immigrants to Americanize, to adopt in a wholesale fashion a "superior" Anglo-Saxon culture, and to discard their native culture. Their assumption was that the ethnic cultures had nothing to contribute to American life.

By the time World War I approached, native reaction against immigrants had reached a fever pitch. For example, just prior to the war, campaigns for Americanization were mounted in several states and laws were passed prohibiting the teaching of school in any other language but English. Displays of German culture — then the largest ethnic group in America — became un-American. In urban centers, settlement houses were expanded in an attempt to domesticate the masses of foreigners, and in 1919 Attorney General Palmer launched a massive dragnet rounding up thousands of immigrants on the grounds that they were Bolsheviks. This was the period of Sacco and Vanzetti's arrest and a few years later, in 1921 and 1924, Congress passed immigration laws barring Chinese and sharply cutting the flow of people from Southern and Eastern Europe.

These measures produced a mixed response in Boston's ethnic communities. There was a tendency for the community to pull together in order to ward off nativist attacks. At the same time, community leaders began to urge assimilation into the American mainstream. For example, often an ethnic self-help organization would form like the Sons of Italy, only to have its members sponsoring local flag day and July 4th celebrations. The communities walked the narrow line between providing their members with economic and cultural support,



and helping them attain a status where they would no longer need such support.

The same holds true for Boston's black community. Individual survival as a black person was intimately linked to the progress and welfare of the whole black community. When the community was weak, black gains were few. When it was strong, advances were made. A united community was needed in order to support individuals during hard times and to resist recurring attacks on black dignity.

Despite the widespread poverty and oppression found in both white ethnic and black communities, the communities were more often conservative than radical. The precariousness of their economic position tended to make them very hesitant, if not downright hostile, to call for sweeping social change. People wanted to right individual wrongs and to end discrimination, but this was usually as far as they went. When changes were sought however, they were fought for both as a group and individually. The Irish, for example, advanced themselves as a group by winning political power (and thus jobs) through the Democratic Party. At the same time people like Leo Cardigan (Chapter II) struggled to advance themselves on an individual level. This latter route was the socially sanctioned method of advancement and it worked for some but could not work for all. A third course of social advancement existed, one that became identified with the massive union organizing struggles of the 1930s. This was to advance yourself as a class, as opposed to struggling individually against all others or struggling as one ethnic bloc against another. In the 1930s unions had the radical element of bringing together groups which had hitherto been fighting each other. Ethnic, blacks, and working-class Yankees joined forces to battle for their common interests, bridging ethnic divisions in order to overcome their mutual powerlessness. It was on this basis of unity that unions were able to win better working conditions and wages for their members.

Despite their cultural differences however, the black and ethnic communities faced similar hardships and often shared similar values. They thus had a basis for unity among themselves vis-a-vis the dominant Yankee community and at the same time, grounds for competition and conflict among themselves. The history of Boston over the

next seventy years revolved around this contradiction. Periods of community cooperation would alternate with periods of intense and sometimes bitter competition with the state of the local economy often deciding when one period would end and another begin.<sup>2</sup>

## II

The permutations of the economy often seem abstract and of not much significance to the average person. Stock prices go up and down, unemployment rises and falls, yet for most, daily life continues unaffected. This was not so for the generation that lived through the economic disaster of the 1930s. The Depression left a deep imprint on the consciousness of this generation. To Sidney Bluhm (Chapter V) "The big difference between my generation and today's is that people of my generation believed almost implicitly in the idea of security — of getting a steady job. That was the big thing. Once you had a good job, you didn't dare leave it." George Graney (Chapter VII) put it even more bluntly: "In those days people were interested in just one thing — survival and means of survival. . . . We had the option of getting whatever job we could and just doing the best you could with it. But careers an' anything else? — nobody knew what a career was in those days."

Even before the Depression the Boston area economy was in trouble. The Boston metropolitan area is the second oldest industrial region in the world. Partly for this reason, partly due to its distance from sources of raw materials and foodstuffs, Boston's growth rate began to fall behind that of other cities. By the time today's elderly entered the work force in the 1920s, New England's industrial base in textiles, leather and shoe production was in rapid decline. For example, the New England textile industry in 1930 employed 264,000 people. By 1970 it employed only 61,000. Boston proper experienced a slow growth of employment in trade, finance and governmental services, but this was never sufficient to make up for the area's shrinking manufacturing base. From 1926 on, the Boston metropolitan area as a whole suffered from chronic unemployment. This occurred in spite of the fact that the Boston area had the smallest growth in population of any urban center in the United States. Boston's city population (as op-



posed to the metropolitan population) actually declined from 835,522 in 1920 to 735,190 in 1970. The combination of sluggish economic growth, unemployment, and a high percentage of unorganized service workers made Boston a low wage area. Boston wages fall about 10 percent below the national average for all types of employment, from secretary to factory manager. They fall 15 percent below the wage levels for states like New York and California. Given low wages and a high cost of living, there has occurred a continual out-migration from the area, with many immigrant children leaving their old neighborhoods and the state itself in search of better job opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

This is not to say that Boston never recovered from the Depression. In spite of its economic woes and a long decade of depression, the real income for workers who started out in the 1920s increased two and one-half times over the course of their working lives. This rise in real income came in phases, rising in the 1920s, falling in the 1930s, then rising again from World War II on up until the mid-1970s. Since then, real income (wages adjusted for inflation) has fallen and today the grandchildren of those who started out poor and became comfortable, now start out comfortable and become poor.

The increase in income over time does not mean that the poor have ceased to exist. Standards for poverty change in relation to the level of the economy as a whole. For instance, a higher income level is required today for family members to get the training they need to work in a more advanced economy. Families without this income level are poor. Neither they nor their children will be able to acquire the skills needed to serve themselves or society as fully as is historically possible. Whole groups of people are thus thrown into the ranks of the permanent poor and unemployable by virtue of their present inadequate living standard. This holds true even though the poor of today are able to buy more goods with their income than their grandparents did.

The increase in real income that has occurred was due to a rise in social productivity — meaning that fewer people can produce more goods — and to an increasing percentage of the population working — primarily women. The percentage of males working has remained about the same since 1930. For women though, the percentage employed has grown from 29.1 percent in 1930 to 44.8 percent in

1970 to 50 percent in 1979. The reasons for this increase vary, but in general they revolve around women having to work, either to support themselves or their families. Rising living standards are thus in great part due to women's contributions to the economy.

### III

The "foreign" nature that typified Boston in 1900 is today a mere shadow of itself. Boston neighborhoods are no longer the tight-knit, ethnic enclaves they once were with neighborhoods now mixed either ethnically or racially. In Chapter IX, George Graney remarks that even South Boston is no longer close-knit: "many people from outside have come into the area. I don't think they care one way or other whether Southie exists or doesn't exist." Changes have occurred which broke up the old neighborhoods but before discussing these changes it must be remembered what the old neighborhood communities did for their members. The immigrant and black communities met a whole range of basic human needs, from providing people with beliefs and rules for behavior to more practical establishments such as mutual aid societies, stores, entertainments and schools. Most important, they provided their members with a sense of identity. You were recognized as a person within the ethnic community regardless of your wealth, status or employment. This was especially significant and it contrasted sharply with the prevailing Yankee-Protestant property-owning culture, wherein a male acquired an identity through his work and a women through her husband's work. This difference is crucial to an understanding of the differences between the Yankees and ethnics.

In the white ethnic and black communities personal identity was more broadly based. You became who you were through a variety of roles within the community. For example, a musically talented person in the black or Italian communities would be recognized and respected regardless of how successful he or she was in the marketplace (see Helen Holliday, Chapter VIII). Or a witty and verbal Irishman would be accorded honor and be recognized as "someone" even if poor and unemployed. By contrast, identity in the Yankee community presupposed property ownership, or at least the ability to control how your labor was used. Yankees believed that you made yourself into

somebody through work — by applying labor to your property. The successful farmer, artisan or self-made businessman were admired role models, respected because of their actions in the marketplace, their transformation of property and skill into wealth. People without property were considered “nobodies,” thought to be lacking in both the moral and material means needed to make themselves into free “individuals.”

The Yankee-Protestant culture dominated America, and won many in immigrant communities to its more individualistic way of life. Ethnics began to pull away from their old communities as their economic fortunes improved. This pattern was less true for the black community as racism precluded mass social mobility and assimilation. At the same time as the ethnic assimilation process was occurring, Yankee culture was itself undergoing a change. By the 1920s proportionately fewer people were self-employed. Most Americans were now wage and salaried employees. This change undermined the link between individual identity and work as personal achievements were far more circumscribed when working in large corporate and governmental bureaucracies.

There also occurred a shift in the economic beliefs which encouraged saving and investment towards a new ethic emphasizing spending and consumption. This development grew from the need to expand domestic markets in order to sustain economic growth. (Work was still considered important, but it was now important for what it allowed you to buy, not for what it allowed you to make of yourself.) Personal identity thus began to center on what you consumed: you expressed yourself through your purchases and your own self-worth became a function of what you owned. To paraphrase Descartes: “I buy/own (Levi jeans, Harvard education, Cadillac cars), therefore I am.” Unfortunately most people never earned a sufficient income to consume at a level where their “individuality” could be realized. Poor people were thus left feeling they were less than full human beings while slightly better-off workers were chasing the chimera of dignity through purchases. Worst of all, the power to bestow dignity was taken from people. Self-worth, which was a birthright in most immigrant communities and something created through work in the

Yankee community, now became dependent on such impersonal factors as how successful you were in the marketplace.

The development of this new ethic was slowed by the onset of the Depression and World War II. It was not until after the war that masses of Americans were able to afford a lifestyle centered around personal consumption. Today’s elderly never fully accepted this new ethic, a factor which creates tension between them and their children and grandchildren. Dorothy Campbell remarks in Chapter IX, “Now I have four grandsons and I notice how they’re being brought up. Everything they do they’re paid for . . . and of course, I don’t think you can blame those youngsters — if they’re brought up that way — for feeling that money is very important. When we were young we weren’t taught that way. We were taught that we had certain tasks to perform and that was just part of a household.”

#### IV

The change in the process of identity formation affected both Yankee and ethnic communities, and laid the basis for today’s more homogeneous urban culture. There also occurred a transformation in the values that guided both types of communities, values which made for conflict between the natives and the newcomers.

Yankee-Protestant culture was built around the work ethic, competition, personal responsibility, fairness and progress. Work allowed people to “prove their worth” to the community. Work was also, as mentioned earlier, the way in which Yankees “created” themselves and acquired an identity. It was seen as part of a larger competitive process where men struggled against other men for control and possession of scarce resources. Emphasis was placed on “looking out for number one” and of getting “yours” before someone else did. Competition also implied personal responsibility. Each adult was held to account for his/her success or failure. There was little sympathy for those who argued that social circumstances limited their success. Fairness and honesty were highly valued because it was believed that in the competitive race no person should have an undue advantage over others. Yankees thought that the best “man” should win, not the



one most favored. Lastly, progress was the system's "most important product." Progress was equated with an increased control over the natural and human environment achieved through an ever larger accumulation of wealth and technology. Overall, the Yankee value system reflected the conditions of nineteenth century America where a nation of small farmers faced the challenge of an undeveloped continent.

Many immigrant groups held a contrasting set of values. For example, many viewed work as a necessary feature of "man's lot" but they did not elevate it into the primary purpose of life. A contemporary song by Boston songwriter Charlie King has a chorus line which illustrates this attitude: "My life is more than my work and my work is more than my job." For the Yankee the opposite held true. His life was his work and his work was his job.

The immigrant and black communities were likewise more cooperative among themselves, believing that personal, family and group survival depended on everyone pulling together. Patronage and favoritism were not considered unnatural or dishonest. You rewarded your own kind first, regardless of someone else's merit. Boston's Irish used the patronage system to advance their whole community, threatening in the process Brahmin political control of Boston.

Within ethnic communities, personal success and happiness was linked to the overall success and prosperity of the family and community. This meant that responsibility to family, relatives and friends was placed before pursuit of self-interest, as for example, with Helen Bowser in Chapter II. Even personal growth could be opposed, as it might draw an individual away from the community in pursuit of private goals. Parents, for instance, often gave their children a double message: "Become American but be like us." Most ethnics placed emphasis on continuity and stability rather than progress and dramatic change. In fact, immigrant communities were quite wary of promises of progress as the promises had often been realized at their expense.

The two value systems led to very different ways of life, neither of which could tolerate the other. Conflict ensued from the very beginning, with the Yankees determined to "Americanize" the foreigners and the ethnic rightfully angry and resisting. Of course, the com-

munities held some beliefs in common. There was a shared belief in constituted authority, be it at home, school, church or in government. People accepted the legitimacy of authority, the right of the constituted authorities to rule. For the Brahmins this belief made sense because they were the authorities. But even immigrant males had a stake in the system as the institution of patriarchy gave all males the right to rule their household. Overall, working class communities appear to have been no more authoritarian than middle or upper class communities. They were, however, especially vulnerable to pressure from authorities. A common attitude seems to have been "you get along by going along." There was a down-to-earth sensibility regarding authority. If authorities pushed too far, people resisted through violence or strikes. If the price of resistance was too high or the rewards too few, people swallowed their resentment and obeyed the boss and the cop.

Religion also appeared to be viewed more as a system of authority than as an expression of spirituality, love or compassion, for many people it was a system of do's and don't's. Joseph Elwood in Chapter IX expressed this viewpoint: "Religion prohibits you from doing a lot of things. . . . 'Course, the law of the land prohibits you. I think religion an' the law of the land goes more or less hand in hand." Obedience was emphasized over compassion, perhaps a community's way of giving divine sanction to a very practical method of behaving in a tough, competitive world.

V

Not only values, but technological changes contributed to the breakdown of the old communities and the forming of modern Boston. These changes are discussed fully in a paper by Allen Lennon called "Working Class Culture: Contemporary Prospects," and I present them here in an abbreviated form. Lennon discusses three main areas of change: the development of scientific management or "Taylorism"; the growth of automobile culture; and the rise of mass media and television.

Scientific management was the effort to rationalize the process of production — to put complete control of the production process into



the hands of management and eliminate those areas where workers controlled their working conditions. Contrary to popular wisdom, in the early 1900s factories employed large numbers of skilled laborers who, through their knowledge of their trade, were able to maintain some autonomy within the factory. Management set the overall task but the workers were able to control the method and speed of production. This degree of autonomy not only gave the worker some measure of power vis-a-vis the boss but it provided the worker with a sense of pride and a basis for identifying with his/her work. Taylorism gathered up the traditional knowledge of the skilled worker and then set about atomizing the work process, breaking up skilled work into a series of mechanical operations that were then assigned to unskilled workers. Skilled workers were, in effect, deskilled, losing power in the workplace and pride and identity in their work. Work was now no longer even a partial outlet for personal expression. Given this situation, masses of people increasingly turned their attention to their private lives, an area where satisfaction and identity could be had



The ads and the reality. By the 1920s the automobile was changing the face of Boston. Sources: *Collier's Magazine* (July 10, 1926) — Boston Public Library Print Department.

through consumption. The immigrant communities, whose work situation had never offered either high wages or job satisfaction, adopted a similar attitude of consumerism. There thus occurred a convergence between the Yankee and the ethnic communities around a consumptionist lifestyle.

A second area of change — the rise of America's automobile culture — further undermined the old Boston communities. It permitted a separation between where one worked and where one lived. Before the advent of the automobile, work and home were in greater proximity. Work problems could be shared with people in the neighborhood and community problems discussed at work. Neighbors were often co-workers, which created greater solidarity both at work and in the community. In Chapter III Peg Gilroy recalls she used to be able to leave her job at noon, go home and make lunch for her children and then return to work. Today, that is unheard of. Work is usually miles from home and often accessible only by car.



The growth of the suburbs is also a result of the changes brought by the auto. Suburbia was originally thought of as a private preserve — “away from it all” — where the good life could be lived. The suburban home and the chrome-plated car were made into the two most alluring consumer symbols. But what helped build the suburbs, buried the city. The auto made Boston’s old neighborhoods less livable. Noise and pollution increased. Highways divided neighborhoods from each other, while river and ocean front areas were paved over. Automobiles also curtailed the old forms of streetlife popular in immigrant communities. They shifted trade from local stores to centralized shopping centers and opened the community to transient newcomers who often had no particular attachment to the neighborhood. The automobile, of course, is archetypal American and supportive of our individualistic lifestyle but for those very reasons it was anathema to the older, more compact, people-oriented neighborhoods of Boston.

The rise of the mass media and mass culture was a third force effecting change in Boston’s communities. One of the most frequent remarks people offered was, “We made our own entertainment.” People were active participants in creating their own culture, be it front porch storytelling and games, music, dancing, or celebrations like the Italian *festa* and Polish weddings. This was not the high culture of Beethoven and ballet, but a people’s folk culture with widespread popular involvement. Most activities were not even thought of as “culture.” For example, families made wine and women made quilts but these were more an expression of a whole way of life and economy than a “leisure time cultural pursuit.” The mass media — from movies to the recording industry to television — transformed culture from an active public experience into a passive, private, consumer experience. Television is a good example of this process. Here, a few people make the product while everyone else is encouraged to passively consume it in the privacy of their living rooms. One retired vaudevillian put it this way: “Movies killed vaudeville and television murdered social life.”

## VI

These three areas of technological transformation radically altered American culture and urban life. They were themselves related to



Members of the Third World Workers Association demonstrate on Malcolm X Day, 1976. Courtesy South End Project Area Committee.

changes that occurred in the national economy, an economy that became increasingly dominated by large monopolistic concerns and which, ever since the 1930s, has required active state intervention to maintain a semblance of equilibrium. Together, the changes in technologies, values and the economy contributed to the breakdown of the old Boston of 1900 and the building of today’s city. These changes were reflected in the lives and behavior of the people interviewed for this book.

One area where there seems to have been little positive change, however, is in the area of race relations. Many Bostonians told me that the level of racial tension years ago was nowhere near as high as

today. They pointed out that in the early 1900s black people lived, worked and played in South Boston and Charlestown and encountered none of the harassment that they would be confronted with today. Similarly, white people felt comfortable walking through predominately black areas of the city and had no expectation of theft or attack. Apparently there was less overt conflict at that time even though job discrimination was then more severe and racial prejudice more pronounced. For example, early in the twentieth century black people were confined to the lowest levels of unskilled jobs such as laborer, janitor and domestic. Opportunities for moving into other more skilled and lucrative positions were severely limited by an effective system of apartheid. Because of this and because Boston's black population was so small (only 2 percent of the total city population) there was very little competition between blacks and whites for jobs or housing. This minimized open conflict and allowed blacks and whites to live together peacefully even though racist ideas were then widely accepted and practiced.

Blacks in Boston made no significant advances in their occupational position until after 1945. In 1940, 53 percent of all blacks employed were in unskilled day laborer positions, only a 3 percent increase from 1890 when the figure was 56 percent. But from 1940 through 1970, blacks made gains as they began to enter the skilled trades, clerical occupations and white-collar work. Meanwhile, Boston's black population tripled in size, from 5 percent of the city's population in 1950 to 16.3 percent in 1970 to over 20 percent in 1979. Despite these

employment gains, in 1970, seven out of ten black men were still manual laborers, compared to a figure less than half that size for Boston's white males. The wage differentials between the races likewise remained the same. In 1970 as in 1950, black men earned less than three quarters of what white males earned for performing the same type of work.<sup>4</sup>

Progress towards racial equality has been uneven at best. Yet as limited as it was, it has meant that whites are now experiencing more direct competition with blacks over existing jobs and housing. During the 1950s and 60s the effects of this competition were muted by expanded job opportunities and higher incomes. But by the 1970s the economy had turned around, living standards were falling and unemployment increasing. Tensions began to rise at the same time as federally ordered school busing began. The situation seemed made for conflict and five years later, in 1979, Boston remains a racial battleground with the likelihood of an easing of tension still a long way off.

There is no easy resolution to Boston's racial problems but if history is any indicator (and it has been in the past), much is dependent upon the course of the economy and people's response to its course. If it continues to worsen there will be a tendency for increased conflict between not only blacks and whites but between men and women and young and old, over the shrinking resources of the economy. It is under these circumstances that both political vision, struggle and good will become necessary. These qualities are rare but again, looking back at history, Bostonians usually rise to the task.

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#### References:

<sup>1</sup>Charles Trout; *Boston, The Great Depression and the New Deal*, Oxford University Press, Inc., N.Y. 1977, pg. 10.

<sup>2</sup>Much of the information and many of the ideas for this section are drawn from an unpublished paper by Richard Schmitt titled, "Class, Class-Culture and Ethnicity."

<sup>3</sup>Sam Bass Warner, Jr.; *The Way We Really Live: Social Change in Metropolitan Boston Since 1920*, Boston Public Library, Boston, 1977. Information for this section has been drawn from Chapter III. "The Family and the Metropolitan Economy."

<sup>4</sup>The information for this section was drawn from: Steven Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970*, Chapter VIII, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1973.

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# CHAPTER I

“NOT SO LONG AGO:  
Oral Histories of Older Bostonians”

## FROM EVERY TOWN AND COUNTRY

American travellers overseas often experience what is known as “culture shock.” It is the experience of entering a foreign culture and discovering that you can neither communicate your thoughts to others nor understand theirs. Frequently the barriers to communication go much beyond simple language problems. They include differences in customs, outlooks on life, types of emotional expression and even body language. The effect of this can be quite disorienting for many people. They become anxious and begin to search for other Americans, not so much out of homesickness as out of a need for others to confirm their own identity.

The experience of immigration is similar. Immediately after landing, immigrants sought their own kind. Immigrant communities became islands of refuge, transplanted homelands where whole villages often resettled. Here Italians could be Italians, Jews could be Jews, and Poles, Poles. Most had no interest in changing who they were. They liked themselves and were in America for the work, the money and the freedom the country offered, not for the opportunity



Immigrants on Foster Street, the North End, 1905. Photo by Orville C. Rand, courtesy of Gates and Tripp.

to become “Americans.” However, they soon ran into conflicts with Yankee natives over cultural differences.

The stories in this chapter highlight some of these differences. They provide a sense of the cultural melange that was Boston in 1900. Angela DiChiara begins with an excerpt from her autobiography. She relates her sudden uprooting from Italy and her resettlement in Boston’s North End, a community which, it turns out, is as Italian as the town she left behind. Farrah Farrah follows Angela and like her he came from a rural background. He grew up in a small, traditional Lebanese Christian village, a village regulated by patriarchal authority. When he emigrates Farrah brings his way of life with him, recreating amidst the tenements of the South End the culture of his homeland. He put it well when he said, “And all the things we used to learn came with us as long as we lived . . . .”

Mildred Horwitz’s family was already acculturated into many of the skills that characterized urban, business-oriented Yankees and her father was a successful small businessman. Her Lithuanian Jewish

family, however was no carbon copy of the Anglo-Saxon family. They placed great emphasis on mutual dependence and support, perhaps born of the fact that for so long Jews were and often still are, a persecuted minority.

Alverna Caldwell and Max Collins are both black Americans who emigrated to Boston from the South after World War II. They are part of an Afro-American culture that is as distinct in its own right as are, for example, Greek-American or Polish-American cultures. Unlike these two late arriving immigrant groups though, blacks have long been familiar with Anglo-Saxon culture. For 300 years they worked and died for it, all the while viewing it close up from the servant's quarters. Afro-American culture is very much concerned with developing community support mechanisms which aid economic survival and promote human dignity. Religion and the black church have been crucial in this regard because for so long they were the only form of cultural expression and self-organization allowed black people. The influence of religion and the black church is evident in both people's lives.

I include Philip Stanley here because he emigrated to Boston from rural Maine but also because his Yankee-Protestant cultural background provides a contrast to the other cultures represented in this chapter. His family appears quite different from Mildred Horwitz's or Angela DiChiara's. It is fiercely independent and living isolated on Baker Island off the coast of Maine, a model of Yankee self-reliance. Existence on the island is lonely and Philip was bred to be both emotionally and economically independent. For example, his father ran his own business and Philip, through hard work, started one also. His family's emotional relations emphasized restraint and civility and Philip carried this manner of relating into his marital relationship. Public service was also valued in Yankee culture as a way to sustain those community institutions they believed necessary for the preservation of their independent households. This attitude is evident in Philip's choice of jobs from pharmacy to teaching, though he was always careful to separate his private life from his public life. For many immigrant groups that was no division between private life and public or community life. Community was that extensive network of

relatives, friends and neighbors that was your life. It affirmed who you were while giving collective support to deal with the problems of economic survival.

Maria Alonse and Caramelo Flores are more recent immigrants, having arrived in the Boston area in the 1960s, from Santo Domingo and Puerto Rico. In many respects their experience repeats that of Angela's and Farrah's only they came as adults, already in their fifties, with few ambitions for themselves but hope for their families. Their motivation for coming to America is straightforward—to escape grinding poverty. The culture they brought with them is not the high culture of their native elites but again, a culture organized around survival, both economic and spiritual. The family is the principal institution in their culture often binding together several generations via mutual support and assistance. Religion is another important force and both Maria and Caramelo express more faith than most native-born and more secularized Americans. These last two interviews were conducted in Spanish with the help of Tom Bein. Translations were done by Diana Echeverria.

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**Angela DiChiara** is eighty-four years old and presently residing in Jamaica Plain.

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I was born in Italy in a little town called Bonito in the year of 1895. I was living with my mother and my baby brother, as my father had come to America first to work and earn the fare to send for us as soon as he could. My grandmother and my aunts were living a few doors down the street from us so one day in September my mother received a letter from my father with the fare for us to join him in America. The first thing she said to me was "We must go and tell grandma and your aunts that soon we will be leaving for America." But when she told them they wished us luck and began to cry. I could not understand why they were all crying. Then my grandmother kissed me and said "I will



never see any of you again." I thought we were going for a little while and did not know that we were never coming back. Soon the day came we had to leave. We went to say goodbye and my grandmother, aunts and my mother were all crying but I still could not understand what all that crying was about. The carriage and horse came for us and we went away for the first stop, which was the province of Avellino. There we were to board the train for Naples. We got on the train and it was very crowded. My mother found a seat and I sat near the window and my eyes were glued to the things whizzing by. I got real tired and must have fallen asleep and the train stopped and my mother was shaking me. She said, "Come on, we are getting off." We had already reached Naples. In the morning we would be on the ship for America. We left Italy the first of November, 1903, and arrived in the port of Boston on November 17, 1903. We were on the ship exactly seventeen days.

In the morning when I saw the great big ship, I was all eyes. I had seen small boats and big boats before, but I had never seen such a great big ship. We got on the ship and it was as if everybody was in one another's way. Finally the captain showed us our bunks and my mother liked the top one. Me, I did not know the difference, so that was all settled. One night someone left the porthole open and it was a very windy night. The water came in and everybody started to scream. "We're drowning." The captain came down and in no time at all everything was peaceful again. After a week the captain came down one morning and said everybody come on deck as we are going to have a sea burial. The next thing I saw was that they were carrying a great big white bag. They stopped the ship and everybody knelt down and started to pray. In a little while everybody was up and they threw that bag in the water. I asked my mother why all that was going on. She explained to me that when someone dies on the ship that is the way they bury them. I did not like it at all, so I asked my mother when we were getting off because if I should die I did not want to be thrown in the water like that.

In another week or so we arrived in the port of Boston.

Everybody on ship was making all kinds of noises, we were all so happy to get off the ship. We reached America! America the Beautiful!

We all had to wait in one room for someone to come after us. It seemed confusing to me. Everybody was coming and going. My mother saw my father between the crowd and said, "Thank God I can see him. He has come for us." I did not know my father as I was very small when he left Italy, but he was very nice. He first kissed my mother and took my brother from her arms and then he picked me up and hugged and kissed me.

With that he rushed us out of there. We got in a carriage with a big black horse and trotted away. Soon we reached the house my father had ready for us on North Street, in the North End. When we went in everything was different. The first thing I noticed was the big black stove and a sink in the kitchen with running water. I said to my mother, "Look, Ma, we do not have to get the water, it is right here in the house!" I soon made friends with a little girl and in a few weeks we started to go to school. She could speak both Italian and English and she had a lot of explaining to do for me. When I met the teacher for the first time she told her I had just come from Italy and did not speak any English. The teacher said, "That's all right, she'll learn," and I did very fast.

Now it was around Christmas and the teacher was getting the room ready, starting to fix the windows with all kinds of pretty things which I had never seen before. So at last it was three or four days before Christmas and I saw them carrying in a great big tree. I was all eyes. I did not know what they were about to do with it because no one had told me anything about the tree. I thought they were going to plant it in the room and I thought to myself they must be crazy in America. I asked my friend what were they going to do and she explained it all to me. When the tree was up everybody in the room helped to put all the trimmings on it. It was the most beautiful thing I ever saw in all my life. But the next day when we went to school I got the surprise of my life. I saw this nice big fat man all dressed up in red and a big white beard and he said, "Ho, Ho, Ho", and sat under the

tree with dolls and all kinds of toys and candy. In a little while he started to call all the girls by name and gave each a beautiful doll and a bag of candy. When I saw I had a doll in my hands I was so excited I was shaking because I had never seen a doll before. And to think it was mine to keep! I could hardly wait to get home to show it to my mother and father, and when I got home I could hardly talk I was so excited telling them all about what had happened in school.

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**Farrah G. Farrah** is eighty-three years old. He was born in Lebanon, was a longtime resident of the South End and now lives in Brighton.

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I was born in Lebanon in 1896 and it's a nice country, good climate an' ev'r'thin' but no industry at all. A person has to have land to plant so they can live. I remember my father's farm. He used to grow wheat an' barley and we had cows, horses, an' donkeys an' we used to use 'em to work the farm, y' know? I used to help my father until I came to this country in 1912 and I've been here ever since.

My country now they have deep trouble—the Moslems an' Christians are fighting. They've lost their goodwill an' good behavior, they just wanta kill one another and do the wrong thing an' jealousy an' all that. That's what's wrong in the country now but really was a nice country. Little country. It wasn't very rich country, but it was nice country to live an' own piece of land. We used to plant ev'rythin', all kinds of fruits an' vegetables, we used to have apricots, almonds, grapes, cucumbers, watermelon, carrots, ev'rythin'. Then we had olive trees there. We squeeze the olives for olive oil, put it in jars and store it. It was very nice life, interesting life an' you're busy on the farm all the time. I like that kinda life really, because I got used to it from when I was a kid, y' know. And anythin' you like when you was a kid I guess you keep liking it all your life. (Laughs.)

*It sounds like you were doing pretty well there. Why did your family decide to come to America?*

They didn't. My father never came here. My mother never came here. But I did myself. I says to my father, "I want to go to United States, I hear so much about it." An' somebody else from town who

was there before was going at the time. So my father said, "I can give you your fare." He gives me twenty-five English pounds. Well, when I reach here I still have five, six English pounds left with me to get along till I got somethin' to do.

On our way coming from Beirut we stopped in Greece. We stayed there twenty-two days waiting for the ship—the ship had just left when we got there. We couldn't catch it and they say "That's the only ship goes from here, you will have to wait till the ship come back." Well, we couldn't speak Greek, y' know, so we used to go to a Greek restaurant an' they'd take us to the kitchen to show them what we want. Then we used to go to a Greek bakery, nice fresh bread, we used to buy that an' keep somethin' in our rooms. This was in 1912 an' I was about sixteen years old when I came over.

We landed in New York and they had an interpreter, to interpret for the Arabic people who came from Syria and Lebanon. Well, they see that I was too young y' know, an' small an' the American fellow says to him, he says, "Ask him to count from twenty to one, backward." So I start, "twenty, nineteen, eighteen, seventeen, sixteen," till I reach "one." He says to him "All right, let him pass," because he found out I was all right. But if I didn't know, f'r instance, maybe he send me back.

*Was your religious background Christian or Moslem?*

No, no. Christian, yeah. But there's some Moslem in my country, in Lebanon. But not where I live. Where I live all the town Christian people. We used to have a Moslem teach us all week and on Sunday he used to line us up, the smaller kids in the front, and when the bell rang on the church, that's the time divine liturgy start, he'd march us in front of the church. We used to go in and stay during the whole Mass. And all the things we used to learn came with us long as we lived, y' know, all the Christian codes an' things like that.

The church used to be in the middle of the town. When the bell sound everybody in town comes to church. See, all within five, ten minutes they reach the church and they have their Mass and on Easter an' Christmas they celebrate the holidays with a great dance.



They really very religious people in the old country because that's where the religion coming from, the origin before it spread all over the world. And they live up to the Ten Commandments, as far as I know they did, and they live good lives but like I say, is not plentiful life, y' know, is poor life because not much land on the farm, no industry, nothing around town or any other place to have a job, see? It's kind of hard life but good climate, lot of sunshine and good clean air, no pollution like here. I mean, a nice life. It's nearly same life as they used to have in Boston in the beginning.

I came right away to Boston. Right after I count from twenty to one backward like I told you. He says, "Let 'em go," so they let me go. I came to Boston and stayed with my married sister. She had left about year before I did and was here.

We lived on Edinboro' Street, off Beach Street, near where they call Chinatown. I lived with her three years. After that I went to Michigan. I had another sister who came with me to Ellis Island, but she went to Michigan. She and her husband were living in Grand Rapids. They call it the furniture city of United States—they make all kinds of furniture, tables, and chairs. I lived there four years, then my brother-in-law passed away. He had what they called the flu an' was bad, was tough for them. When he died my sister had four kids. Anyway, we stay there another year or so an' they put me guardian over my sister an' the children. The priest got that through the judge. He says to the judge, "They're kids, they gotta have somebody to look after them, see that they're fed." "Well," the judge said, "You're her brother," so they put me down as guardian. After that, I says to my sister, "We got nobody here that we know very well, but in Boston," I say, "lot of people who came from our home town, y' know, from Lebanon, an' I like to go back to Boston." She says, "All right." So we came to Boston an' we been living here since.

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**Mildred Horwitz** is eighty-five years old. She was born in Russian-controlled Lithuania and presently lives in Brighton.

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I was born in Lithuania, 1894, In Licovna, I know that much. But I wouldn't change one stone here for the whole Russia. (Laughs.) It

was a good life there. My father had a cap manufacturing business and we had a very nice living. My mother's people were all in America and she was the oldest so they kept asking her to come to America and so we did. My father came first, then when he had money enough to take us we came here and we been very happy here. It was a little struggle at first you know, but we were never short.



Merchant in his store, circa 1900. The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.

*You mentioned that your parents were well-to-do back in Lithuania. They had servants . . .*

Yes. They really didn't have to come to America. But when things were getting rough, when there was fighting with the Jews and so on, my grandmother and all my relatives in America said to my mother, "you better come here."

*So part of the reason they came was because of the pogroms?*

That's it. The pogroms weren't yet in Lithuania. See, we were in Lithuania, not in Russia, but when my mother's parents hear that there's pogroms they start telling her, "You better come here." It's the idea that my mother was the only one from seven daughters and her father an' mother were here and they kept on saying, "Enough is enough. We want you here." And so we came and we've been very happy here. Very good country.

We first lived on Harrison Avenue in the South End and it was a little struggle, y'know, what with five children. My parents opened a dry

goods store right down on Harrison Avenue and we made a good living and I was thrilled to have another grandmother and grandfather and six aunts. So it wasn't hard at all. An I loved it when I came and I still love it. 'N' 'at's it. (Laughs)

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**Alverna Caldwell** is seventy-seven years old. She was born in Washington, D.C., in 1902. Later she moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and recently to Boston.

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*What was it like growing up in Washington, D.C.?*

Well, to tell the truth, it was very segregated there far as my people were concerned. We had our schools and everything but they were



**Alverna Caldwell displaying her craftwork. Photo by Lawrence Elle.**

separate. Like, if a white school was over here, our school was nearby. We had a playground an' everything just like they did but we were separate. An' if you went downtown to the place called the Belasco Theatre, you had to sit in the balcony, you couldn't sit downstairs. There was a Holy Trinity Church up in the area where we lived. You couldn't sit downstairs there. You had to go up in the balcony an' sit.

I remember hearing Senator Brooke say once that he knew what it was to be a black growing up in Washington. I could tell him I knew what it was to be there too. As a child, I always said if I got old enough to leave Washington, I would never move back. I hated it just that bad. I have seen so many rotten things done to my people — I've seen whites running with chains an' sticks an' things holler-

ing, "Lynch 'em, lynch 'em." And that preyed on my mind. I'm tellin' you, if it wasn't for God, I would have more than enough hatred in me, but I know I can't make it like that. Can't. But I have seen some terrible things. I left Washington after I came out of school in 1918. I used to go back an' forth because I had relatives there an' then I stopped going. I went there last year, after forty-six years an' I still hate Washington.

*What were some of those things you remember?*

Well, I tell you, it was just the way the whites would do the blacks. We'd have to sit in the back of the streetcars an' things like that. Now in Washington, being a child they never bothered me 'cause I'd just sit anywhere. But in going from Washington to Virginia, oh my goodness, they'd slap a little black kid just as quick as they would anybody else. 'Course I never was hit 'cause I always got out of the way. My mother always made us mind our own business: "Regardless of what you see happening, keep on going!" she said. But the main trouble my mother had from me, I would fight — that was the only thing that worried her, I would fight.

*So if someone hit you. . .*

Hit 'em back. That's right. But now it's different.

*How is it different now?*

I mean with me it's different, my life is different, I wouldn't have that hate. I just look at people and I feel sorry for them, because they don't know. They don't know they are just ignorant of the Word of God. When you get into the Word and the Knowledge of God, it makes a change in you. All that bitterness an' hatred is gone. Because you know if Jesus had to carry things like that in his heart against us, He'd never have died for us. So you know we have to take all that into consideration.

*Now was there a large Ku Klux Klan in Washington?*

I never knew nothing about that until I was grown. I have heard mention of things like that, but my parents never talked about that with us. We heard it, we'd get it hearing somebody else talk about it or through someone reading it in the paper.



*Were your parents trying to protect you?*

Well, you see the thing of it is, whatever happened between my parents, they never showed it to us children. I have never heard my mother and father have an argument. All homes have some kinda misunderstandings but, I guess whatever happened between them, we children weren't around. An' when I raised my children, that's the way I raised them — whatever happened between their father an' I, they would never be around to hear it. You bring up more respect in them that way.

I came from a Christian home. In the evenings my sisters an' I would sit at my mother's feet and she would read the Bible to us. And each one of us would have to tell her — as if we was in school — what she read to us. Then we would have to say a prayer, like "Now I lay me down to sleep." An' that's the way I raised my children. But the parents of today are not raising their children that way.

(Laughs.) You know, I'm glad I'm not raising children now. I tell myself, if I was raising children I'd be in a penitentiary someplace because if I had a child that would come up to me an' say "no" and "yes" an' talk back to me, down on the floor he'd have to go. My children are grown an' married, an' I introduced them to all the people, "yes ma'am, no ma'am," . . . *they'd better say it.* Unh-unh, you don't go hollerin' "what" an' "no." Oh, that burns me up. The children have no manners nowadays. They have no respect for elderly people. I can go out with my cane an' there'd be a crowd gettin' on the bus — they almost knock me out of the way. I step back and give it to them. Then again, there's so much these children have to cope with, but your training comes in the home. You have to start with the child from the day it's born. You know sometimes a mother be nursin' her baby, an' the baby start cutting teeth, an' he'll bite the mother on the breast. All right, well she'll shake him and say "Don't you do that." An' he'll look at her an' laugh. Next thing you know he'll do it again, he'll look up an' then she spank him an' he'll frown an' cry but he won't do it any more. So you have to train that child while he is in your arms — even before he's born you have to train him. You have to be careful of what you do an' how you act while you carrying that child because that nature will be born into that child. And I tell you something else. I think the law

is too lax — they don't let the parents discipline their children. Now they got books that they go by. Uh-uh, years ago you get your peach tree switch or paddle an' you went into the woodshed. An' believe me they worked on you.

We had a tree in our yard an' my mother would say, "Go an' git me a switch," an' oh, goodness, I'd start, "Momma, please. I ain't gonna do it no more." But one thing about those ol' people if they say they were gonna whip you, they whipped you. They didn't play with you. Uh-uh. An' after my husband died an' I had to be both mother and father, I learn my boys how to cook, wash an' iron jus' like any woman. I taught 'em like that so they would be independent an' be able to do for themselves. I don't think they raise many children like that nowadays.

*What is your impression of Boston?*

You know, I'm telling you Mississippi is peaceful considering Boston. People here must remember a black man was the first one lost his life up here. An' not only that, blacks go on the battlefield an' fight just the same as the whites. All right, now why can't they enjoy the freedoms that they fight for? Now it says that all — lessee, "We the people of the United States in order to form a more perfect union," I don't remember all of it, but it says, "*All men are created equal.*" I don't sing "The Star Spangled Banner," even when I was going to school I didn't sing it. It's not the land of the free an' the home of the brave. The black man in America is just like the children of Israel was down in the land of Egypt. That's the way it is. They fight for these things, but they not about to enjoy them. An' I tell you one thing, a black racis' ain't no better than a white racis'. Both of 'em are bad. An' they better change their ways, 'cause hell will be their home if they don't.

Now I'll say this for Mississippi, the children are going to school together. You don't have the incidents down there like they have here. I read more about Boston than I do anyplace else. But you know I'm not afraid to go anyplace. You know why? Because when I go out anywhere I talk to the Lord just like I'm talking to you. Now say f' instance, you have a child, that child come to you, say "Daddy, I'm going to such an' such a place," you'll go with him, protect him, right? You'd lay

your life down for that child, won'tcha? All right, now I'm a born again Christian, my heavenly father's child. I go out that door and say "Dear Lord, your child is going." You go with Him, so it's just like He's walking there by my side. I can't fear no person that breathe an' walk like I do. An' I think the quicker we get like that the better we get along in this world.

*Were you always as religious as you are now?*

Uh-uh. Nooo, 'cause I'm telling you, I used to be a holy terror an' awful about fighting! When you saw me I always had a dress with a pocket on it an' I carried a 25 automatic all the time. I didn't back offa nobody — man, woman, chicken or child. That's the reason I say I know what it is to be a holy terror, an' I know what it is to be born again.

*What sort of work did you do before you were married?*

Well, growing up in Washington they had a theatre they called the Blue Mouse Theatre. And I loved to sing and dance. My sister an' I, we used to stand on the corners there an' sing an' dance for people so they'd throw us money. Soon I ran away f'm home to be with the show. I was a dancer, doing what they call exotic dancing, here 'n' now, but at that time we called it feature dancing. I was with Cole's Dixie Belles, an' then with GTS Players. I was just what they call tank talent. You play here tonight, maybe tomorrow you be someplace else, one-night stands. I carried the 25 for protection then but I didn't bother no one unless they bothered me.

*Why did you leave dancing?*

You get tired, an' there's some things you run into on the road. Maybe you would come here tonight to play and they wouldn't have a hotel available for you, 'cause you see back then there wasn't hotels for black entertainers. They'd have to put you up in the dressing room or some'in' like that. An' just going from town to town — tank towns we would call them — it got to be a pretty hectic life.

*What was the segregation like back in those days?*

Well, I can tell you one thing, it was pretty rough. If you wanted to go someplace an' sit down in a decent restaurant an' have a meal,

they'd tell you, "We don't serve niggers here." I used to tell 'em "I'm no nigger *an' if I am*" I happen to be yo' mother, *tha's* the reason you recognize me." 'Round Washington, 'round Washington was really something. If Senator Brooks 'n' I got together I think I could open his eyes to things.

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**Max Collins** is sixty-five years old. Born in Higgins, South Carolina, he presently resides in Dorchester.

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I was born in Higgins, South Carolina, in 1910. I was on a farm an' it was a'right, y'know, we were sharecroppers, an' what you raise the bossman would get it, y'know, get half of it. Raised cotton, corn, peanuts an' had a garden 'n' ev'ythang. Raised watermelon, canteloupes, cane, peas, hogs, all that stuff like that. We raised ev'ythang.

*What was life like down in the South in those days?*

It was really nice, y'know what I mean. Ya had to obey an' do right, if ya livin' on a plantation, but as long as you did your work an' ev'ythang like that, well, the white people were good to you. Oh yeah, they would call you a nigger an' pat you on the back an' say, "you're a good ol' nigger" or som'n like that but if he was a *real, real* white man he would be nice to you, he'd be better than the people in Boston. If he says he liked you and if one day you lackin' som'n, well, if you wasn't puttin' on, he'd do anythang for you. Like he'd go to bat for you. If you go to his house you'd have to go to the back door, an' if he tell ya to come in, he'd yell, "Whattaya want, come on in," an' he'd give ya anythang that you need. You could get it from him, oh yeah, anythang. They was real nice, y'know.

*Why did you move to Boston?*

I had a cousin here, he told me that he could get me a higher way of living an' I listened to him an' left my home to go live with him. I came up to Boston 'round 1940, an' I haven't been happy since. He told me I'd be better in Boston, y'know, he came down to Carolina an' *fooled me* an' I ain't never liked it but I've had some good jobs here. *Real good jobs.* I've made some good money for a black man.



I was unhappy 'cause the job that my cousin wanted me to take, he told me I'd make this kinda money but I wasn't makin' that kinda money. But the owner was good to me. You might of heard talk of him. His name was Maurice Gordon [a large Boston realtor]. He bought my first bottle of insulin when I was taken sick. He got a son downtown now named Robert Gordon. He's down on Federal Street. In fact, he practically owns everythang on Federal Street. You can see the name Maurice Gordon on the highway an' he practically own Boston, I mean, y' know, 'fore he passed away. He died with the same thang I got—sugar diabetes.

I was a janitor an' then a superintendent of one whole street. An' Mr. Gordon he had my name put up on a sign just like he got his name downtown now. "If you want an apartment, see my superintendent an' he will get you a place to stay." Yeah. I was superintendent of Marble Street in Roxbury, the whole street. An' he had my name put up in big letters, just like he got 'em put up downtown in his name. An' then I would get so much for rentin' an apartment, I'd get so much for cleaning it up, so I started to make pretty good money with him but then I got this job with Consolidated Service Corporation. We did work for Harvard University, for M.I.T. and for Boston University.

*Collins explains how Gordon helped him out and signed him up for Social Security. He then goes on:*

When I got ready to buy my first home Mr. Gordon fixed it with Mr. Shelton of the First National Bank, an' Mr. Shelton let me have \$600! Mr. Shelton he was head vice-president of all them banks. There's some real good people in Boston. But you gotta know who to go to. One time I could have been a shareholder in a department store but I let my wife tell me, "I wouldn't do that, I wouldn't do that," but if I would of listened to what they told me I coulda had a share. But she wouldn't let me do it. Now I'm sorry cause when I had somebody to back me up an' help me get into them thangs I didn't do it. Well, thank God, I'm still livin'.

Y' know I coulda had a share in Amer'can Telephone Company, I coulda had a share in all them different thangs . . . I woulda been rich

today if I had listened to them 'cause they did ev'rythang they could to try to get me some stock. I woulda even had a share in—I know you gonna say this is a lie— but I woulda even had a share in the Chase Manhattan Bank, oh yeah! If I had listened to them an' did what they told me to do. Oh, they tried to get me to buy stocks an' bonds.

*Where did you meet your wife?*

Well, this is my third wife. I met her down South, near Asheville, North Carolina, that's where she calls her home. I met her there but we shouldn't a married. I been with her thirty-one years. I once tried to leave. I told her right out, "I think that the best thang for us is to separate, 'cause I been sick so long an' I don't feel things gonna work out." 'Course, she don't believe like I do, y' know. She's a Christian girl, a minister an' ya hear her on the radio ev'ry Sunday mornin' quarter ta eight. I usedta be active in the church. I'm a ordained deacon in the Baptist Church and do deacon work, y' know, like funerals, or marry somebody. I do some of everthang a deacon's supposed to do.

*What other sort of activities were you involved in?*

Well, I did so much work that I didn't have a chance to do much else, no more 'an go to church. Other than that I've tried to live right.

*I'm curious why you decided to stay in Boston rather than go back to South Carolina.*

Well, I don't know. 'Cause my wife, she wanted to go back an' I told 'er, "No, I'm makin' the money that I never have made before an' I don't wanna give up this job." But I went to work one night an' out li' that (snaps his fingers). I had two strokes, one of them of the brain. Then I had a coronary bypass operation, y' know, clogged vein—and I had to take speech therapy 'cause I couldn't talk.

Y' know, I dunno what I dislike about Boston now because I done spent all these years here, now I like it. I like the combination of the people an' I like the way some of 'em treat ya, an' I just love ol' Boston. I love ol' Boston. 'Cause it ain't like it usedta be, but it's real nice, real nice.

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**Philip Stanley** is seventy-five years old. He was born and raised on a small coastal island in Maine and now resides in West Roxbury.

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I'm presently seventy-five years old. I was born in Maine, in 1903, in the town of Tremont which is one of the towns on Mount Desert Island. My father and mother lived on Baker Island, which is a 100 acre island off the coast of Mount Desert Island. I had a brother but he died in 1919, about the second year of the flu. So that left me an only child.

I grew up on the island by myself and looking back, it was a very, very lonely life, but some people with certain types of disposition like that kind of life. I remember the story is told about one of my ancestors. He lived on Baker's Island with his family till a second family moved on. Then he thought the place was getting too goddam popular so he moved to an island which was even further away from the coast.

My father was a fisherman and lobsterman and it was a very hard life but 'twas all they knew and so I don't suppose they considered it too hard. Today, looking back on it, it was very, very hard. I never considered becoming a lobsterman. I'd get seasick when I went out an' my father, being a kindhearted person, he'd stop his fishing an' take me into shore so I never did get used to it. Also, me being more or less an only child, an' my father being much older, he kept me locked up in cotton battin'. He didn't allow me to do a lot of the things that boys should have been doing in that age and time. I was very sheltered. Very, very sheltered.

*Were your parents what they call the old-school, very strict disciplinarians?*

No. My mother was not, although she was almost stoic, she didn't believe in showing emotion. But my father was a very demonstrative person and I expected demonstration. My mother pushed demonstration away.

*What did you do on the island?*

Well, the town built a small school on the island an' they provided

a teacher. Usually girls would come to teach there just after they graduated from high school. Seldom was one able to stand more than one term or so. Discipline was usually non-existent although a remember having one teacher who was a sadist but she only lasted one term. I finally left the island to go to high school and boy! Was that a change! There were other boys I could now associate with. The first year was a very unhappy year. Then I started to adjust and had a very happy time, I enjoyed school. I wasn't athletic so usually I was tryin' to pick up a little money while in school. One job I had was as night telephone operator. About ten o'clock until six or seven in the morning. I think that paid \$13 a month. (Laughs.) Seven days a week!

*What made you decide you wanted to go to pharmacy school here in Boston?*

Well, it was a strange thing. My original plan was to teach and I had a job all lined up for the beginning of the fall term at another lighthouse further out in the ocean. It was Mount Desert Rock on which there was no land, no soil or anything, just a solid ledge 'bout 20 miles out. In those days they had three lighthouse keepers on it. Two of the keepers had children so they decided it would be cheaper for them if they had a tutor come on the rock and tutor their children rather than board their children inland. But one week before I was to go onto the rock to start my tutoring job, one of the lighthouse keepers was transferred inland. It wasn't economic for one keeper to hire a tutor so I was without a job. I then took a temporary job in a drugstore and the temporary job turned into a more or less permanent one. At the end of two years I came down here to Boston to the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy. I was very happy in the profession although I was always partial to teaching. I'm a school volunteer now, so in the last year anyway I'm doing something I started out to do an' was never able to do.

I came to Boston in 1924 and throughout most of my college years I worked part-time. Part-time in those days took up almost thirty or thirty-five hours a week. So between that an' your studies you didn't have much time to nose around gettin' into mischief, or at least I didn't. I'd graduated from college in 1928 and I was making \$35 a



week when I got through school. Then, during the Depression, I was forced to take a cut of \$10, but anybody who had a \$25 a week job was considered very lucky. I was better off than the average person 'cause there were a lot of people really hungry in those times. I never was.

I opened my own store for a time, but I had a bad fire and the financial picture changed. It was so much more expensive to replace anything and my insurance didn't cover it all. Also, working alone during the early war years sapped my health a good deal. I wasn't able to continue. I woke up one morning an' just couldn't put my feet out of the bed. I was several months getting out of that. It was more or less a nervous breakdown. But I was lucky that it wasn't a real one. Just close.

*Were you married then? And how did you meet your wife?*

Oh yes. I was married by then. I knew her brother very well and she used to come visit him. I never met her, but I had a picture of her . . .

*How did you happen to marry her then?*

Well, looking back, we had about two or three hours alone together at the time. (Laughs.) But, uh, we came to an understanding pretty quickly and in forty-five years she never said an unkind word to me and I never said an unkind word to her. When we got annoyed, we shut up. Both of us. But we didn't let the day end an' go to bed mad.

*What is your religious background?*

Well, in the days I was growing up, Maine was very much Protestant. Very Fundamentalist. I s'pose my grandmother firmly believed that each Catholic had a forked tail that was curled up in the seat of his trousers. An' I had an aunt, who, after I strayed from the Protestant path, I don't s'pose would of spoken to me unless she had to.

I changed after I made a visit to a relative in Detroit. While I was out there we went out to visit the Ford factory. We went by this unroofed church building an' I remarked about it. My cousin said, "That's Father Coughlin's church [a famous 1930s Catholic radio preacher]. Would you like to see it?" So we went in and for the next year an' a half I couldn't keep that building out of my mind. It

kept . . . , it kept haunting me. I talked to a person of the cloth about this and he affected my life a good deal. Through his urging I took instructions in the Church and finally, after a year, I entered the Catholic Church. And it has made a great change in my life. A great change.

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**Maria Alonse** is sixty-three years old. She was born and grew up in Santo Domingo and now resides in Dorchester.

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When I was ten years old I moved with my mother and father to Tenen, which is located in an area called Isabella de Cupillo, where Christopher Columbus founded Santo Domingo. There I grew up and got married in the small town of Guanamico, but even though I had a husband we were very poor. I had thirteen children though only twelve are currently alive. Five live in New York and seven in Santo Domingo. We had little money so I went to work but I did not work in a factory. I worked in agriculture, working very hard from morning to night. I worked as a coffee picker, maize sifter, tobacco leaf picker and washerwoman. Work was necessary because we were a large family and very poor. At the time we owned nothing and we all had to share everyone's salary in order to survive. My life was so devoted to working I was living without knowing myself. I only had time for bringing up the family and for work. There are still many people in this position in Santo Domingo, many who are poor, so poor they cannot even go to school to better themselves. But thanks to God, the poor are now standing up and are choosing the right path.

After some of the children were grown we decided to come to the United States. We couldn't bring all the children so I sent one of my sons to live with my sister in the town of Samena. She always helped me out with my family and adored my son. I told her, "look here Maria, I want to leave one of my sons to live here with you." My son knew her well and she said yes so I left him with her. He was twelve at the time. My sister managed to place my son in the American School in Santo Domingo. He entered there and remained enrolled for eight

years, studying very hard. He continued as a student in Puerto Rico but the scholarship offered to him was not sufficient to cover all his expenses and none of us could offer any help. I told him to come here. He could earn money for his studies and help bring over to the States those in our family still left in Santo Domingo.

When we came here we first moved to New York City as we had two sons living there. We were well received there and always able to earn a living. I also had two daughters who were very young. My son suggested to us that since they knew no English it would be a good idea to send them to a school up here in Dorchester which teaches in Spanish. It's supposed to be the best school in the area. I called a Dominican friend of mine who lived here to help locate the school and then my husband and I moved up to Boston to enroll my daughters in the school. They have finished and got married and now only my husband and I remain in our apartment.

We like it here and thank God the government is well managed. It's very good. It gives to the elderly and to the children, offering schooling to those who—in Santo Domingo—would be unable to go. For one year my daughters walked from the front of my house to the school and thanks to God nothing happened to them. And I never had to pay a cent. I am pleased with that, especially since my daughters learned a little English. I was never able to learn the language nor will I, because I don't have the time and I don't have sufficient drive.

I now have five of my children here and four grandchildren. I have seven children left in Santo Domingo. I don't know how God will help me to bring more of them to this country. Without Him, I couldn't do it. But God, who knows all, does know and He knows my desires and wishes. He will find ways to send more of them here because it is from Him that all things derive.

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**Caramelo Flores** is sixty-eight years old. He was born and lived most of his life in Puerto Rico and now resides in Dorchester.

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I grew up in Pueblo Salvema in Puerto Rico. I came to the United States because I had a daughter who was here. I was very sick and

couldn't work, so I asked her to help me. I came and lived with her and this is the case with many Puerto Ricans. You ask for help from family members who are working and living in the United States. Also, the medical help is better here than in Puerto Rico where it is nonexistent, or so says my daughter.

In Puerto Rico I had to work very hard for very little. I tilled the land. One half of what I produced went to me and one half to the owner of the farm. That hurt. It was very frustrating for the family. My wife and I had nine sons and to maintain them was not easy on our little income. Under these conditions we were poor, very poor. But despite being poor I was happy. I only had to think about resting peacefully and sharing equally our few resources.

I never worked in a factory in Puerto Rico. When free I travelled a lot, sharing with others like I am doing right now with you. I shared my God. This is my calling, my work. You see, when God is adored, He in turn loves you. He is here and He is the earth and He is the heavens. He is the one who seeks us all out, in the priesthood and outside it. In this manner and in this way I *live*. This *is* who I am—travelling, walking, talking, disseminating the word of God. I have met many people, many families from different countries. I have heard many distinct languages and I know how to speak English, but it is with my smile, my affection, my love and my good behavior that I speak to others. I do this because I do it. I don't know anything better to do. I don't know anything else. But I am content, I am happy. I'm happy to talk to other people and I'm happy, 'cause though I'm still ill, I'm alive.

When I came to Boston I found a better life, a better life for raising a family. All in all, everything is better here, and that is still true today. You see in Puerto Rico I had three very poor families who helped me when I was sick. Here, I found even more people who were willing to help. I turn to my old friends for help and I help them. In this manner I've gained a great deal from living in the United States.



## CHAPTER II

“NOT SO LONG AGO:  
Oral Histories of Older Bostonians”

### EARNING YOUR KEEP



Sewing machine operators at the Macullar Parker Company, Boston, turn of the century.  
Courtesy of The Bostonian Society.

Nowadays, work is often viewed as a necessary evil, something to put food on the table, not something to inspire passion. The realm of personal life, what you do *after* work, has acquired work's old importance. There are exceptions to this. Professionals and certain traditional craftspeople like carpenters and electricians are supposed to be earning a living doing something they enjoy. But now even in these occupations there are grumblings of discontent.

This is a far cry from the past when in Yankee-Protestant communities work was viewed as a divine calling and work life and personal life were more closely integrated. What allowed this lifestyle to sustain itself was the fact that America was for a long time a nation of independent producers, property owners who worked for themselves on family farms. They produced what they needed and, in theory, it was through their own labor that their fortunes would be made or lost. Only in the cities did you have masses of propertyless workers, people forced to work for others rather than themselves, and usually

at wages that condemned them to remain propertyless. Immigrants formed the bulk of these urban proletarians laboring in the factories and shops where powerlessness and exploitation were the order of the day. It was within the walls of the factory that the modern distaste for work developed. No longer was initiative necessarily rewarded, employee rights respected, or quality work honored. The factory whistle came to be the death knell for the work ethic.

The people in this chapter began work in the 1920s and they fall somewhere in between the old attitude of reverence for work and the more modern attitude of indifference or hostility to it. Dorothy Campbell and Joseph Elwood suggest these variations in attitudes.

Dorothy came from a genteel background, attended a finishing school, married, and had a child. For her, work was neither necessary nor a part of her expectations as a middle-class woman. But at age forty she was forced to begin work after a series of catastrophic medical expenses. She took a job in a factory where her Yankee-Protestant

values immediately clashed with the reality of factory life. Hard work, doing your best, and excelling over your competitors were values which served her husband well when he ran a small business, but they soon exhausted her when working on a piece rate system in a factory. Dorothy struggled with this situation for five years until it ruined her health. She then found work which more closely corresponded to her values: temporary office jobs where she could come and go and set her own schedule. Her career demonstrates how difficult it is to adjust the values and lifestyle acquired in one environment to the demands created by a new situation — a problem thousands of people experienced as they moved from their old ethnic neighborhoods into more middle-class jobs and communities.

Joseph Elwood's background is working class. He is an example of a man whose "life is more than his work and his work more than his job." As a young man he reluctantly left the music business for work as a ship's electrician because it promised steady employment. The shipyards, however, fell short on their promise and layoffs became a regular feature of his work schedule. They cost him a pension and brought periodic financial woes but Joseph did not experience the sort of personal crisis many men undergo when they are heavily identified with their work. George Moritz and Leo Cardigan had to face this type of crisis but Joseph escaped its worse effects because his wide variety of interests outside of work gave valuable ego support throughout the hard periods. Today fewer people identify with their work in the way in which, say Moritz or Campbell did.

The people represented here lived through the era of the sweatshop, company unions, yellow-dog contracts, blacklists and the dog-eat-dog competition of the Depression and, partly for these reasons, it was their generation that finally won the right to collective representation in a union. All those immediately affected, like George Moritz and Joseph Elwood, speak favorably of unions. Also worthy of note are people's comments on our pension system and Helen Bowser's comment about her garment center boss: "If I went home an' went to bed with him I would be all right, see, that's the type of a man he was. The women that went home with him were all right, but I never would an' he hated me." The issue of sexual harassment at work has

now reached public awareness but years ago women suffered from this type of abuse with little or no recourse save to go along or suffer the consequences.

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**Helen Bowser** is seventy-one years old and has been a lifelong resident of Jamaica Plain.

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I was fourteen years old when I started my first job, that was around 1922. I'm seventy-one now and I retired at sixty-two. I remember I wanted to stay in school an' become an artist but my mother forced me to take a factory job at the A. J. Teller Company. We made oilskin coats. There was no plastic then — we had never heard of plastic. This place still had gas lights and the machines were run by leather belts. You didn't just press a button. You had to start them by hooking them up to leather belts running above. You'd go in in the morning and these big, wide leather belts were going all around you. Everybody had long hair in those days, so you had to be very careful you didn't get your hair caught in the belts. They also had ruffle guards to keep women's skirts from getting caught in the machines.

I went to the factory all day long to stitch but my mind wasn't in that dirty old place. I'd sit there an' think of all sorts of small stories. My mother used to say, "All you can do is sit there and make up stories. What an imagination!" One story was called "House on a Hill." I wrote it all down an' it would of made a great soap opera. The daughter in this house, Marie, fell in love with the boy across the street an' they were going along wonderfully. Then there was an older married man who liked Marie and worked with her in a downtown office. He started to bother her a little bit but he didn't go too far. In those days they weren't like today. Marie didn't want him but now her boyfriend thought she liked the married man. Then there was another girl involved an' there was so much going on I could have made it a serial. I should have been a writer for TV.

Y' know, in them days, if a girl was a writer she was bad. They thought you were crazy if you thought up stories, particularly if they were dirty stories, oh whew! You were no good. All my mother used to



say to me was, "You're going to the House of Good Shepherd." That was where they put bad girls an' orphans. They told us they licked 'em with wet towels there and they held that up like hell to you. They put fear in us an' you wouldn't do nothing for fear you'd get put in the House of Good Shepherd. My mother threatened me with that if I didn't go to work at A. J. Teller. Now this ERA in a way is good because we couldn't do nothing. I didn't disobey my mother till I was twenty-nine years old an' I didn't open my pay envelope till I was twenty-five. She took our pay envelope closed up. An' my father, my father never opened his envelope. The fear of God was in us, y' know?

My mother ran the house pretty much an' I s'pose she did that to keep us going. We could of run away prob'ly — like the kids today. 'Course they have no punishment today, but then you would of been thrown in jail an' kept there. I would of been put away. If your mother beat you every day you couldn't even stop it. Today I don't think your mother has the right to beat you. God, it was terrible. I didn't have any rights. My mother didn't even let us cook or use her kitchen. I never cooked nothing. When she got sick, I took over. (Laughs.) Oh, I took over. I took over that house and changed it around. She got cancer of the hip and was upstairs in bed. I went up to help her, I'd clean eight big rooms an' I just dared my sisters — who all got married an' left me to take care of my mother an' father — I just dared them to say som'n' to me. I was the mother then.

During this time I was working every day, an' I thought my sister was coming in to look after my mother. When I found out that she wasn't I left work. I went up to welfare an' y' know how much they gave me for staying home to take care of my mother? Eight dollars. Eight dollars a week! An' they gave my mother som'n' like sixteen. An' she only lived a couple of months after that. This was when I was in my forties, around 1950, and then I went back to work making furniture covers in a place down in Forest Hills. I worked there twenty-nine years altogether, and all the time dreaming an' thinking of what I would do when I retire. This last fella that I worked for, he was a mean — ooh! If I went home an' went to bed with him I would be all right, see, that's the type of a man he was. The women that went home with him were all right, but I never would an' he hated me. I ran five

machines. I put a hem on with one machine, the 'lastic with another, then buttonholes an' snaps. I'd be running a machine an' the other girls are in the toilet smoking. But I wanted to make an impression. Older people try to make an impression 'cause they know they're gon-na be fired if they don't. So I'm working my heart out an' then the floor lady got sick and he puts this younger girl in charge. Well, I had trained this girl. She couldn't even read or write. I trained her how to thread the machines, how to sew, everything. And, by God if she didn't turn around and tell him that I wasn't working. I asked her, "What do you mean?" She said, "You took fifteen minutes to thread that machine," and I said, "Who taught you to thread the machines?" When the boss went by I said, "Mr. K—, don't you think I do a lot of work here?" He said, "No." That went through me like a knife. After years of killing myself he says "No." I said, "Okay, buddy" — I got wise then 'cause I had already signed at age sixty-two for my Social Security. I would have a check coming in so I didn't care. I said, "Okay, girls" — and all the girls look around — "Too-de-loo." They said "What?" — they knew those five machines had to be run an' if I left they'd have to do it, so they said, "Helen, whattaya plannin'?" I said, "You'll see." I started getting my apron an' shoes an' I started packing my suitcase. "Oh, Helen, don't do that." I knew they didn't want me for the love of me, they just wanted me to do the work 'cause they're in there smoking all the time. They followed me down the stairs an' I said, "I'm going. I've had it with him. He doesn't think I work, let him find out." He had to hire four people to run those machines an' they didn't stay. Y' know, I think I closed that factory down. He moved to Philadelphia. Yeah. There was only about five of us old people that were keeping him going, honest to God. I should of done it sooner.

For forty-two years, I was a stitcher. I ran every sewing machine. I did top stitching, understitching, invisible stitching, used the double needle, single needle. I did everything. I made raincoats, I made overalls, I made shirts. I worked on furniture covers, and I worked on automobile covers — oh, those are hard! Y' know, the straw and the leather together. I done those. I made children's dresses, I made women's dresses, I made men's pants and fishermen's coats an' hats. I

made all that. Forty-two years. An' in the end they give you \$147 for Social Security.\* My God, it's terrible. You go up there an' they'll say, "Well, you have \$147 coming for Social Security after forty-two years." I said, "What?" (Laughs.) My God, it's wicked.

\*[The average Social Security benefit in 1977 was \$2,900 for the year or about \$200 per month. This is just about equal to the official poverty line for a single elderly person.]

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**George Moritz** is seventy-five year old. He grew up in West Roxbury and is presently living in West Roxbury.

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I missed my calling. I wanted to be what my brother wanted me to be — a structural steel draftsman — but he had to go an' die an' spoil the whole thing. Couldn't help it of course. He fell on the ice when he was about eighteen years old skating. He hit his head somewhere and that bump led to spinal meningitis at twenty-nine. Young fella, prime a life. He was my father — I always considered him my father.

I was traffic manager for United Shoe Machinery for eighteen years. I know every rate book, I know all the railroads, I know every steamship line. I've gone down the holds of boats to figure out spaces and how many cubic feet my shipment would take. I've been a shipper an' a head shipper an' I've worked with help. I always had four or five help under me. I know my business from A to Z.

I was the head export shipper at United Shoe Machinery when we had a branch in Boston. They kicked me out at sixty-two. Efficiency men come in there an' they took over an' they laid me off and about fifty women — all about age sixty. Now the women couldn't get Social Security, Medicaid, or nothing, they're only sixty years old. So they had to wait two years before they was eligible to collect at sixty-two.

My layoff cost me about \$80,000. I lost three years salary at \$150 a week — an' that was good money in 1962, *good money*. I also lost my pension. I would've got maybe \$300 a month pension. Y' know what they voted me in '62? They threw me some crumbs — \$30 a month. Dollar a day! An' I still get it. Collected \$6,000 off them already. I get

that check every month, long as I live. They gave me a \$1,400 life insurance policy, a hospital plan where I'm fully covered and I can buy all my drugs at 25 percent. So I got a pretty good deal when you figure it out. I got kind of sore on account of them letting me go so young, but they made it up other ways, see? So I've been collecting off of them this \$30 a month and every once in a while they throw a couple more dollars cost of living raise—it's up to \$33.60 now.

I was about seventeen years old when I got my first job (about 1920). And you'd never believe how I jogged my brains just to get a job. I needed money to support my parents and went to work for a printer. I was paid five dollars a week an' pushed a wheelbarrow up an' down Summer Street, wheeling paper down to the printer. One day some of my gang saw me pushing a wheelbarrow. They went out and told all my gang. "Beautiful job George has got. He pushes a god-damn wheelbarrow in the city." Jesus, I was embarrassed. I quit that night. That was my first job. Five dollars a week. Know my hours? Six days a week, eight to five.

During the Second World War, I went to work for a company up in Waltham. I was down in a South End bar one day having a glass of beer and this guy says to me, "George, are you working?"

I says "No."

"Do you want a job?"

"Sure, I need a job bad, I'm married and gotta have a job."

"Well," he says, "go out to Clifford Manufacturing. Ask for Mr. Delagan, he's the boss out there and tell him I sent you."

I went out there and Delagan reads my background on my application and sees I had a lot of experience shipping, order clerk and all that. He hires me and I'm down there about two days. I didn't like it. He had me opening big long cases and carrying heavy tubes — we made radiators for airplanes. So then he put me assembling those radiators and I hated that. All that aluminum dust in your throat. I came down with sinus trouble. I was going to quit and did quit. I said, "I can't stand that job, it's too much. Those damn chips get in my nose, bother my sinus." A doctor told me, "You got to get out of that work. It's not good for your health."



Well, Delagan convinced me to come back. He puts me in a tool crib and that was right in my line. I took it right over and in a week's time I could run it. Delagan liked my background and he finally got me the job that he knew I could handle and that I was qualified for.

I was there nine years. Oh! We formed a union. We got out on the ballfield one day, had two or three spokesmen, an' we formed a union — joining the C.I.O. We sent two men to the union an' got a charter an' those two men represented us. The union said, "How many members you got out there?"

"We got 1,000 people, manning three shifts a day." About twenty women wouldn't sign so we said, "Aw, the hell with them, we don't need 'em." We had an election. N.R.L.B. men f'm Washing'n come out and we walked away with it, nothing to it. We got a charter and within about six months my pay went from 90 cents an hour — which was peanuts — to \$2.80 an hour. Just by forming this union. We had been in a company union giving the company 50 cents a month out of our pay an' they'd put it in their pocket. Thousand employees, 50 cents a month's a lotta dough. We got nothing for it, no benefits, no nothing. You just had to belong or they wouldn't hire you. See, they had a closed shop. The owners run this union themselves. Company union they call it. We got the hell out of that.

I was one of the ringleaders of that union. There was three of us. This was the days when the C.I.O. had Eva B—. She was the one that organized all of Lowell, all the knitting mills in Lowell. They were gonna deport her. Said she was a Russian Red, y' know. When you were in the C.I.O. they called you reds. We went in the United Electrical Workers of the United States. Good union! The next best union to Local 125 of the Teamsters. I carried a card for them nine years and ended up getting seven dollars an hour. Made good money.

I left there finally. No, uh, I didn't leave. I got bumped. This company Clifford Manufacturing had a little plant in South Boston and this shipper over there had one more year seniority than me. I got bumped and that was the end of that.

Then I worked here an' there. I worked for a beauty shop as a shipper and two or three other jobs before I worked for United Shoe.

After retirement I went to work for General Binding from '63 to '72 for four hours a day. I had five guys packing an' I did all the managing an' bills of lading, placing orders, stuff like that. One day I went to help a guy fill an order. It was late in the day so I says "I'll give you a lift." We made these plastic bindings that go on the end of notebooks. Stock 'em 100 pieces to a box. So I started filling some of the orders when both my legs give way and I fell flat right on my behind. Three thousand pieces of plastic, all different sizes, lie mixed on the floor. I yelled, "Get Dave out here" — that's my boss. Dave comes an' says, "What the hell you doing down there?" I says, "I can't walk." He says, "Come on. Who the hell you kidding, George? C'mon, get up, you look crazy sitting there." I was sitting with all this plastic stuff around me. (Laughs.). I don't blame him, he thought I was crazy. I says, "Hey, I'm all through today. I'm not working here no more."

"Hey, come on, George. This fall ain't gonna make your mind go, is it?"

I said, "I told you when you hired me, when I couldn't do this work no more, I'm through. I may give you a five minute notice, I may give you a month's notice, but this is it." He says, "Aw, you'll be in Monday." They helped me out an' they drove me home. I saw three doctors an' they says I got arthritis of the hip. I never went back.

About two months later my boss come over an' he says, "George, we want to take you over to the shop. There's gonna be a little poker game." They knew I loved to play poker. So he comes over about five o'clock and first he takes me over to Blanchard's an' got me two quarts of V.O. for a little gift. Then he drives me there 'cause I was in a wheelchair and couldn't walk. I got over there — I wasn't dressed — was in an old red shirt an' a sweater, an' geez, I walked in the door, musta been 150 people there. All with gifts for me. I got about six, seven hundred dollars in gifts an' all kinds of shirts an' everything. An' there's this big table all spread out. We had a beautiful party an' after the party was over we played poker till two o'clock in the morning. They were awful good to me, awful good. He told me I had a job there as long as I live. I went home an' I cried for a month. I missed that place something awful.

**Julia Kiewicz** is seventy years old and a lifelong resident of South Boston



**Julia Kiewicz:** photo by Jean Boughton.

I used to work piecework. We had to make a certain amount, then over that we'd make extra money. But we had to work so hard that a lot of the employees would get nervous breakdowns and this was — can I name the place? — Gillette Safety Razor, when the safety razor first come in. We'd only get ten minutes for a break in the morning and ten minutes in the afternoon. And we couldn't stay a minute over ten minutes. We'd have to be right back at our jobs because if we didn't put out a day's work and make extra then we weren't considered good workers.

They took movies of my job because it varied. Sometimes something in the copper used to swell and it would make the work

harder. So we had to work pretty hard to do our quota and then over that. 'Course it was nice to get the extra money but we worked awful hard for it and like I say, a lot of them couldn't take it and they'd get a nervous breakdown or quit or sump'm. At night you'd go home and you'd still be working — you couldn't get it out of your mind.

**Leo Cardigan** is seventy-one years old. He grew up in Dorchester and is presently living in West Roxbury.

I worked in the plastics business originally, starting in 1927, and that's where I learned my tool-making trade, well, die and mold-making. When I got through there — my company folded up in 1957 — I was superintendent of the plant. I went from tool an' die-maker work to foreman of the machine shop to methods an' time studying, an' eventually I took over as superintendent of the plant.

That was at Northern Industrial Chemical Company. It no longer exists. After that I went into Standard Thompson. Their big products are airplane valves and automobile thermostats. I worked there from '57 on but I would no longer take any supervisory work. I had worked too hard carrying a pencil with too much worry an' responsibility to do it anymore.

But thank God I was able to adapt my trade. When I went to Standard Thompson — and I was fifty years old at the time — I was able to adapt my mold-making trade which I had down, to working on punch press dies. In doing that I could still make a good week's pay an' all I had to worry about was the little blueprint they gave me. Long as I could produce that blueprint I had no further worries. We produced that blueprint an' turned it in to inspection. Inspection okayed it an' that was it. No further worries. See that's what I wanted in my last years. I worked too damn hard going from just a kid up to the superintendent of the plant. When I lost it all at the end, I says, it'll never happen again. I'm going to take the easy way out this time.

Y' know, when I was in different supervisory jobs at Northern Industrial they used to ask me to get rid of my tools — to sell them after the war years when tools were damn scarce. But I'd never sell them.



Those tools were like an insurance policy to me and I'm glad I didn't sell them because I then saw the day when I had to use them again. I had about fourteen years at Standard Thompson and just four months short of thirty years at Northern Industrial and I wind up with not even a pension.

I lost the pension at Standard Thompson because at one point they considered I had broken seniority. What happened was I got a layoff notice on Wednesday to go on Friday. Friday night they come out, "Okay, Leo, you're gonna stay. We got more work for you." The following week I get another notice I go Friday. So after this some of my friends get me a job at Kleerite — they make electrical transistors. Well, come Friday they tell me again "Oh, you don't have to go, Leo, we've got work for another week."

I said, "Oh no, I got a job. I'm going." I figure this way I have a job at Kleerite that I can go right in on Monday morning. If I leave that job maybe next Wednesday I'll get another layoff notice that will stick. Well, all right, because of that juggling they put me down as I quit — therefore I lost my seniority. I only wish I had saved those pink layoff slips — which I didn't — because as things are today, I'd fight them in labor court. I think my story is as good as theirs. But without the evidence, what good was it? I know damn well they wouldn't open their books for my benefit so I may as well just take it. My pension of fifteen years would've been small, maybe in the neighborhood of \$75 a month, but \$75 to go with your Social Security would be quite a little boost, just the same.

*Was it hard finding work when you left trade school in 1923?*

Well, it was hard in a way but I worked pretty hard at the time. I was married when I was twenty years old (in 1926). And I *didn't have* to get married either! (Laughs.) I don't know — maybe it was good, maybe it was bad. . . . I don't know, but I was married and being married I worked myself into an obligation. I had to go to work.

I went down to Northern Industrial and started as a hand molder. On that job I seen as many as thirty men be hired in the morning and the next morning you might have fifteen of that thirty. By the end of the week if you had two of that thirty you were lucky.

The job was very hard. On the other hand when other men were making \$20 to \$25 a week, the old timers in there — mostly Polish and Lithuanian — they could hit from \$50 to \$60 a week. Now, I couldn't keep up with them, but I could hit anywhere from \$40 to \$50 a week. I had to do that. I had to dig up a home because a year and a half after I was married my first kid was born.

We lived a nice easy life from '28 to '30 and then the Depression hit. Well, because I was young and able I was able to last at work and not be laid off. I just fought my way through. I went on the maintenance department and the molding department. It was a case of dog-eat-dog. It was piecework. If you could make a thousand a day an' this guy could only make nine hundred a day, and they were going to cut it down to one shift, then it didn't matter a damn how much seniority or how good a man he was, he got laid off an' you didn't. That's the way you kept your job, you beat everything in front of you. So those days weren't good days to work, but I had no choice. I had a kid every year, I had four kids. I had to support them, I had to feed 'em. Fortunately I was in pretty good physical condition — I used to be an amateur boxer. Before I went into work I used to go in the Bird Street gymnasium an' start in by running two miles and then after that I'd go down an' go through some exercising an' boxing. I think it gave me an advantage an' it's payin' off now. If I do boast, I think I'm in pretty good condition for seventy-one years old.

*Was there a union then at Northern Industrial?*

Toward the end. Unions came in, oh, I'd say after the war possibly '46, they started. We had several strikes and got the Machinists' Union into Northern. During the war I was foreman in the machine shop. By the Korean War I was supervising the whole plant. But the major break that really pushed me was World War II. I used to be in charge of maintenance on the night shift, doing most of the machine work for that department. When the war came they had to swing me over into die-work because that's where the great rush came on them. So I was put on die-work and that gave me a deferment during the war — which I was glad to get because I had four small kids. Today I regret I'm not a veteran but in those days I was glad to get the deferment. I

don't feel ashamed of it because I think with four small kids my job was right here. And I still have at home a note of thanks for the work I'd done on the development of the civilian gas mask.

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**Dorothy Campbell** is seventy-seven years old. She grew up in Cambridge and Allston, moved to Watertown after her marriage and later returned to Allston.

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I took my first full-time job during the Second World War. I was forty, my son was twelve and I had to go back to work very suddenly because my husband was ill a lot and we needed money. I went into a factory and it was quite an experience.

I did that instead of, say, working in an office because, while I had some secretarial training, I had never actually worked as a secretary. Office work would mean brushing up on my shorthand and my typing and I didn't have the time to do it. I needed something I could do right off.

*How did you adjust to the change from home to working in a factory?  
Did you feel your class standing was being lowered?*

No. I didn't. But everybody else did. All on one side of my family were artists. My grandfather on my mother's side was co-founder of the Massachusetts College of Art. My aunt was an art teacher for many years. She felt it was terrible I was going there. She even suggested that I take a vase with a little flower and put it on my bench. I definitely was not in the type of place where you'd do anything like that.

The factory was very, very bad. They didn't have running water, they didn't have rest rooms. It was like an old sweat shop. The man in charge felt that I shouldn't be working there. He wanted me to run a little donut shop. I didn't care about donuts so finally I applied to another place. I tried to get into office work this time because my husband didn't like to have me in the factory. The company didn't have

any office work but they said "If you lasted a year and a quarter at this other factory you'll probably last in our factory." That's when I went into the second factory. But it was a strange thing. My only objection to the first factory was that all the real factory workers were on one side and all the Sunday School ladies were on the other side.

This was during the war now. The difference between the two was that the Sunday School ladies were working for patriotism, the other factory workers were working for the money. I was definitely working for the money too and the thing that disgusted me was that they put me with the Sunday School ladies instead of with the factory workers. But *we got together*. You know, there's a rhythm to machines, and as you work with tools you find yourself singing or humming. One day I found myself singing along because the factory ladies on the other side were singing. Then suddenly something made me stop and look around. I could almost feel a sudden silence. All those girls on the other side were looking over at me because it was most unusual for anyone on the Sunday School side to have anything to do with the ladies on the other side. But after that we got along very well. I sang and they sang. Before I left I was very touched because the factory girls wanted to take me out and the thing they thought might appeal to me was the outdoor parks concerts with Arthur Fiedler. They were going to take me there when I left suddenly. I thought it was very interesting and I definitely had more of an empathy for the youngsters on the other side than with the Sunday School ladies.

At that time, as far as I was concerned, it was most unusual for a woman in my situation to work. I was then living in a suburban Watertown neighborhood and I was the only woman working in that neighborhood. I don't think that women as a whole were looked down on for working, but women factory workers were not considered very fine.

I worked five years altogether in the two factories. Then I started passing out at the bench — piece work is pretty bad, you know — and they were afraid I'd fall into the machines or something. At that point they decided that this wasn't a good place for me. This was at the second factory. I went to a doctor and he also said I shouldn't be working in a factory — "It was too hard."



I'm the type of person that's very intense and I've had to battle that all my life. If I was in a place I'd want to be the head or be as good as anybody else, and so when I left that factory they had to put three girls on the job that I was doing. Most of the girls had a different temperament than me. They could take it much easier.

I then decided I'd have to go into office work. I've forgotten what my first job was but I know I asked this man how I was doing. He said, "Very poorly. You'll never be a success in office work." If he hadn't said that last phrase, it would have been all right. But when he said that I made up my mind I was going to be a success. I said, "Well, then, I'll leave." He answers, "No, don't leave now, leave Friday night," and the next day he brings in my replacement and upsets everybody in the whole place.

Years later, he didn't realize it, but I applied for a job from him again. He wanted to hire me but I turned him down. I needed the money then, too, but it gave me a great deal of pleasure.

I worked in different offices and seemed to have an ability for figures, the same ability I had when I was in high school. I went to night school for accounting and gradually worked into that type of work. But seems as though I was always getting upset about something — politics and so forth, so I got tired of office intrigue and decided that I'd take less pay and go to work for an outside agency. I then worked five years for Manpower and enjoyed it very much. They would send me on all sorts of jobs and used to make \$50 a week on me or more. Usually I didn't work with the Manpower girls — the jobs they sent me on were more specialized. I would stay as long as I wanted to and quite often gave my own notice.

*Would you say you had a hard time economically?*

Oh yes . . . definitely. My husband had five major operations. These were the days before Medicaid and health insurance and so this series of operations pretty much bankrupted us. We lost the house, our car . . . a lot of different things happened. I had to work two jobs. I worked for R. H. Stearns during the week in their fur department,

and when their fur department wasn't busy I would go up in their office and work there. On Saturdays I worked for nine hours doing accounting work in a factory up in North Cambridge. I've done a great deal of office work. When I went back to the Leland Powers School on the fiftieth anniversary of their founding everybody wanted to know what I was doing. They were all now the heads of departments of speech. I would say I was a bookkeeper and there would then be a dead silence, as though I had snuck in there by mistake.

I didn't feel ashamed though. I think the thing to do is to do whatever work you do as well as you can and you can learn from anything. When I went to the factory I had no idea that later I'd go into tutoring English to foreigners but that's where I began getting interested in foreign people. I'd probably never have been interested in them if it hadn't been for the factory. Also when I was in the factory I learned how to use both hands. This lady in front of me got so disgusted with me one day that she got up and showed me the best way to do piece work. "Pick up with one hand while you're putting down with the other and hold as many in your hand as you can." She never knew anything about time and motion but she did know that that was the thing to do. You don't waste the motion. I learned to use both hands and that helped me a lot when I went into business. So you see you do learn from everything. No. It didn't bother me. The only reason I didn't go into scrubbing floors is I don't like housework. (Laughs.)

I didn't have any free time throughout this period because I was keeping a house going, I had my son, and my husband was going in and out of the hospital. I just didn't have time to do anything else. One of the things I like about retirement is that now I don't have to get out and battle subways and things like that. I always went in town for my jobs and used to have a long trip in and out. When I was working in a factory I had to leave the house at half past six and I didn't get home until six at night. I don't think people realize how lucky they are to be able to sit and have another cup of coffee if they want.

**Mary Means** is seventy-three years old. She was born in South Carolina and is presently a resident of the South End.



Mary Means: photo by Lawrence Elle.

*Did you grow up on a farm?*

Right. I didn't like it too well but I had to make out, understand? My parents loved it. They had to work hard on the farm but they loved it. 'Course my father died when he was very young, I thing he was forty-eight. My mother died at seventy-seven in 1934.

I picked cotton, hoed cotton, an' we had chickens an' cows and hogs. My family left the farm when I was fourteen and we moved to Lawrence, South Carolina. I married in Lawrence and then I moved to Asheville, North Carolina, and lived there from 1924 until I come to Boston.

It was rough back in the 1920s. I didn't work then, my husband worked. An' it was real tough. He was working construction an' one-half the time he couldn't work because it was bad outside or there'd be no work. I would pick up a little job here 'n' there but things weren't so hot.

*Was it hard for black people to get work in the South?*

Well, it wasn't too bad, 'cept you didn't get much money.

*Why did you decide to come to Boston from North Carolina?*

My husband was a elevator operator an' he come up here on a vacation an' just fell in love with Massachusetts. Everybody told him that he could make a good living up here, so we moved up here. He was up here about a couple weeks before we got a job. He an' I got jobs staying in. He took care of the grounds an' helped me to take care of the inside.

We worked out in Belmont for fifteen years. We only had that one job. My boss died in '70 but we still worked for the children a couple years, and then they split up and moved. I was the cook an' took care of the children. His work was to take care of the yard an' help me take care of inside the house when he couldn't work on the yard.

*How'd you like your work?*

Fine. Oh, now I wasn't the best of cooks, but I satisfied 'em. An' I was a very good laundress. Everything I done good, pretty good.

*Sounds like you were a good worker.*

Well, I hate to say it but I wasn't too bad. An' the chil'n must think so because, maybe once a month, the girl from New York, she always come to see me, an' if she can't come to see me, she always call me on the phone. I liked them almost as well as I would my own child. You know, with children, you can't say they're good all of the time, they get to be a little nasty sometimes I would say, but I don't think they wasn't decent.

*How many children did you have?*

They wasn't mine. They's the boss's. He had three. Two girls an' one boy. I had two but I wasn't successful — wasn't able to bear them



no longer than six an' a half months an' both children died. I was sorry 'cause I love children an' I wanted 'em very badly but the Lord took 'em an' He know best I guess.

*Was this person a wealthy man?*

Millionaire. I don't have to be scared to say it now, but if he was living he would kill me if he heard me say that because he was scared. He would think, y' know, somebody would do som'n to his children. Kidnap 'em or som'n, so I never tell anybody he was rich. But most people know we worked for a wealthy man.

He would act as if he had no money. He'd spent his money kinda scarcely, until he went to buy his clothes. When he bought clothes he would buy the best.

*How well did he treat the two of you? Did he pay you good wages?*

Well, I wouldn't say over average but we were satisfied. He wasn't too bad. Anytime we were in a hole, all we had to do is to ask him. He'd letcha have it, with a smile. He was a awful nice fella.

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**Joseph Elwood** is seventy-three years old and has been a lifelong resident of South Boston.

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Applying for work at the Charlestown Navy Yard, April, 1939

I was born in South Boston in 1906. My father was from Lawrence and Lowell, my mother from Ireland. He came to Boston looking for work. See, the mills went out of existence and moved South. They had gigantic mills up in Lowell but it was cheaper to produce it in the South, so they went down there. Lowell is a dead city today on account of that. Well, my father worked as an electrician for many years. I followed his suit and became an electrician. I was thirty-two years in the shipyards around Boston and Fall River. Worked as a ship electrician. Y' know, ship electrician an' shore electrician are two different things, Lot of changes. Everything has to be watertight on a ship. But it's wires, it's electrical work.

*I understand you also worked for a time as a musician. How did you happen to get into that field?*

Well, it goes way back. My father was musical and used to play the harmonica and jew's-harp. But his father 'n' mother died when he was very small an' he never got a chance in music — he had to go out an' earn a living. He determined that his children would get a chance an' I took up violin an' my brother took up piano.

After school I formed my own dance band. I used to hire a saxophone player for the band an' he was an excellent saxophonist but he had to have music — couldn't fake anything. I used to spend all my money buying him music. Then I said to myself, "Elwood, you ought to take up saxophone, save yourself some money." Which I did an' I think everybody around Boston took it up at the same time!

I earned my living playing music during the '20s, around '29 when business was bad. I was working for a hotel an' got laid off. I then thought I'd make music my business. I was living with my father an' mother an' I didn't have to worry as long as they supported me. But the music business is funny. You work an' you don't work. Sometimes you'll get too much work an' the next week you don't get anything. I could never make it my living so I gave it up an' just used it as a sideline, something I'm still doing today.

*How did you manage during the 1930s?*

Well, it was hard sledding. The '30s were a rough time. People were just trying to live on what they had. I was lucky my father had a

job. He was working steady so I could fall back on him but if I wasn't living at home, boy, I don't know . . . I'll tell ya, I think there would've been a revolution except for Roosevelt. Regardless of what they said about what he did, he put Social Security through and the W.P.A.

I was doing occasional work during the '30s. Towards the end I got a job over in East Boston doing electrical work on fishing trawlers but they only hired me when they needed repair work. It was 1941, just at the beginning of the war, before I got steady work in the shipyards.

It was tough going at the shipyards, very tough going. Some people asked me, "Why'dya stay there?" Well, geez, when you get in a job an' you're married, you can't jump from job to job, y' know what I mean? That's why I went down to Fall River. I had been in East Boston after the war and when a boat came in, that was excellent, because you would work night and day until the boat went out. But when that boat went out, you were laid off until the next boat came in. You can't live on that so the wife says "Go down to Fall River and get another job."

I spent fifteen years broken time over in East Boston shipyards. I worked the Simpson and the Atlantic berths and at General Ship. I worked in the Navy Yard four years an' then I went down and worked thirteen years in Fall River, commuting back and forth every day.

*When you first started working in shipyards, were they organized into unions?*

I have worked in some yards that weren't union but usually the shipyards are union. 'Course, I'll tell you, union has its good points an' its bad points. Without a union, they will get you for the least thing they possibly can, I found that out. The worst thing about a non-union place is you have no representation. Say for instance, a man gets working an' his lead man doesn't like him much, which can happen at many a place. The lead man can go up to the boss an' say, "I want this man fired." The boss'll say, "For what reason?" "Well, I don't like this man," and the boss could fire him. But where there's a union you can't fire a man like that. The union representative hears it. Your shop steward goes up an' he hears the case an' he pleads for you Well, if it's something that they figure is the lead man's fault they can fix it up.

*Were you a union leader yourself?*

No, I never was. I kept away from it because, y' know, the company has to tolerate it but (laughing) in their heart an' soul they don't like them. But I found unions very beneficial.

We didn't strike durin the war. See a lot of these boats had to be built on time, an' over in East Boston where I worked, they were only allowed so many days in the shipyards. I mean we used to work night 'n' day. We couldn't strike. The government would've raised hell, but after the war we struck. Do y' know I spent thirty-two years in shipyards an' I never even got a pension out of any of them?

*Why's that?*

Well, if you work in the shipyards you have to work there for ten years before you're eligible for any pension. An' they can lay you off as many times as they want an' regardless of whatever other job you may be doing, when they call you back you have to go. They only give you a couple days. If you don't report back you lose all your time. Well, I had fifteen years broken time in East Boston yards, then the Navy Yard offered me three years straight work. So what would you do? I took the three years naturally, but I lost my time, my fifteen years. Then the Navy Yard didn't want any more permanent people working there. They'd hire me for six months an' then the week before the six months was due, they'd lay me off. The boss would say, "Don't get any other job, I'm gonna hire ya back next week," but he wouldn't make me permanent. The three years he hired me straight, they had to fix it up. I was called a "temporary indefinite." Then they had a big layoff an' I wasn't a veteran an' I didn't have time. So I went down to Fall River an' stayed down there thirteen years.

*Did you then get a pension through Fall River?*

No, I didn't. See, I was with Bethlehem but when General Dynamics took over their yards they only allowed a certain time for the Bethlehem men to transfer an' they didn't give me enough time to get back in. So I had to start out right from the beginning. I worked seven years with General Dynamics, but not ten years, so no pension. I understand the government's fixed that up now and they can't do that anymore, but I have no pension. The only thing I'm living on is Social Security.

# CHAPTER III

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NOT SO LONG AGO:  
Oral Histories of Older Bostonians''

## MARRIAGE MORALS AND MANNERS

Perhaps the most striking area of change over the last seventy years has been in male-female relations. Women won an increasingly greater position of equality with men at the same time as rigid sex roles for each gender began to break down. These changes did not come easy and for many of the people in this chapter they aroused ambivalent feelings. Most of the women interviewed appreciated the liberalization that has occurred around marriage, divorce and work opportunities, but expressed concern over issues such as working mothers and sexual morality.

In the 1920s, marriage and family were a central part of people's life plans. In fact, full recognition of your adult status often came only after you were married. For women, the popular conception of the times was that womanhood required marriage and children. The spinster was somehow only half a person, whereas a wife fulfilled her womanly nature by tending kitchen and nursery. Despite this belief, a smaller percentage of women married in 1920 than did in 1970. This



Wedding portrait, Dorothy Boyd and husband, around 1930.

put a tremendous emotional strain on those who remained single, especially as there were few options open to them in the economy. Unmarried women often remained with their parents (see Helen Bowser in Chapter II and Mary Mandia, Chapter IX) or tried their fortunes in the work world.

The degree of parental involvement in arranging a marriage depended on ethnic background and how recently the family had emigrated. Mildred Horwitz and Angela DiChiara experienced a good deal of parental prodding. Angela's stepmother was instrumental in arranging her marriage while for Mildred Horwitz motherly pressure was important. Few questioned the goal of marriage. In general it was seen in a positive light and as somehow inevitable.

Lillian Harvey, Dorothy Boyd and Farrah Farrah more closely approximate today's idea of marriage in that individual action rather than parental directive tied the knot. Both Lillian Harvey and Dorothy Boyd came from more traditional American backgrounds and



their descriptions of their courtships reflect the values and conventions that were accepted in the 1920s. For example, sexual relations before marriage were strictly taboo and if Dorothy Boyd is representative, they were considered "just unthinkable."

In Protestant middle-class circles women were viewed as too ethereal to be sexually active. Dorothy Boyd remarks, "a woman wasn't supposed to like (sex), a woman was supposed to accept it. That was part of her wifely duties. Period." This disposition may seem dated, a repression of sexuality in general and woman's sexuality in particular. But Sam Bass Warner in *The Way We Really Live* argues that this prudery served a practical end, as it increased women's power in the household. Wives now had the power of sexual refusal. He notes how the genteel rules governing courtship, the prohibitions against vulgar language and drinking, and the codes of public courtesy all "gave a new place to the woman in the home." They offered the wife "some protection against the physical violence of her husband" and posed the home as an alternative to the "crudeness and naked power of the industrial city." (p.21) The need for a greater empowerment of women within marriage is also evident from Angela DiChiara's statement about the first years of her marriage: "it was as if I had changed bosses. First I had to take orders from my step-mother and my father and then I took orders from my husband and his brothers . . ."

Eldridge (Steve) Henderson presents another view of 1920's sexual morality. He felt there was as much sexual activity years ago as there is today, only then it was more hidden. One thing is clear, however, is that there were different standards of sexual conduct for men and women. Men were given free rein while women were restrained and even ostracized if they violated middle-class standards of morality. If this attitude appears hypocritical it must be remembered that this was the era of the Boston censor when books and plays were banned, alcohol prohibited, and contraceptives outlawed. Self-righteous posturing often set the political tone, accompanied by class and racial snobbery. Contrast this to Steve Henderson's sage advice, "don't get prejudiced, don't preach and don't discriminate." Will Rogers could not have said it better.

The type of family arrangement Americans had at that time varied with class and ethnicity. Immigrant families were more likely to have extended family ties with several generations living together while middle-class families tended to be nuclear. In the 1920s, the nuclear family with the nonworking wife was seen as an improvement over the nineteenth century urban family where the whole family had to work—husband, wife and children. Popular wisdom had it that working women and children were a threat to the family and by 1900, sizeable numbers of working people were demanding and winning a sufficiently large income so that only the husband in each family had to work. This allowed the wife to stay home and attend to domestic duties, something that had previously only been the privilege of the well-to-do. But what started as a step forward had a negative side in that women were now confined to the house. Work opportunities for married women were severely limited and there were moral sanctions against those wives who did work or who became divorced.

The economic function of the family also changed over the past three generations. In the nineteenth century, each family produced much of what it consumed. In the twentieth century, this productive function ended and the family became, in economic terms, primarily a unit of consumption with family life centering around beautiful homes, cars and vacations. The good life came to be equated with a high standard of living and ironically, to achieve this both parents must again work. It is in this context that Dorothy Boyd (in the group discussion "Divorce, Women and Work") complains that today's children have too much. She questions whether the gains made in consumer goods are worth the loss of the mother who must go to work to buy these goods. It may have made sense for her generation to focus family energies around acquiring autos and washers, she felt, but things have gone much too far today. Others felt that there was simply no choice about the matter, that to live comfortably today requires two incomes. Few saw the possibility of what many working parents are now demanding as a third option: that society find new ways of supporting parents as they struggle with the economic and social costs of raising children.

In "Divorce, Women and Work," a group of women speak posi-



tively about the changes in divorce laws and agreed with the sentiment that if you are not happy in your marriage you would be better off separated. This sounds to modern ears like simple common sense but it actually represents a dramatic change in the expectations people bring to marriage. In the past, marriage was not oriented towards achieving "happiness." If it happened, so much the better, but marriage and the family were for most people an economic and social necessity. Only recently has there been widespread acceptance of the idea that personal happiness should be a goal in marriage. Formerly women were expected to subordinate their interests to the interest of the overall family, a goal usually defined by the husband. Today, it is somewhat more acceptable for a woman to modify family interest to achieve her own goals. The discussion also reveals that women were aware of oppression in the past but there were fewer alternatives open to them. Louise Pizzoglio sums it up well: "Today, if you suddenly say, 'This is it. I can't take any more of this!', you can go off somewhere and you can find help. In those days if you didn't go home to mamma or pappa, I mean, where could you go?"

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### FARRAH G. FARRAH

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I tell you how I met my wife. I knew her an' all her family because they came from same town I did in Lebanon. We came together on the same ship and she was a lovely girl and her family good friend. One day I says to myself, "I'm all alone. Why don't I get married?", y' know, just like that I think to myself. And I had a sister who was here before me. She used to tell me, "Get married. Why don'tcha get married," an' she's going after me so it sinks in my mind that I should get married.

Well, one day I met my wife when she was going to work. She used to work in the garment industry sewing dresses for women. I says to her, "I'm going to ask you a question." She says "Yes, tell me what it is." She was anxious, she want to hear it so quickly, y' know. She liked me but I never much talked to her or met her 'cause in those

days, especially for my people, we never made dates or went out with girls like they do now. We never done that then. It was bad for a man and a girl to act like they belonged together. They never did that because they're strickly, y' know, nice people, Christian families, and all that. I told her, I says, "I like to marry you. Would you accept to marry me?" She says to me, "Yes. Why Not?" And when she said that I said to her "All right, we'll be over some evening to talk things over with your father an' mother." She says, "I don't care for them, I'll do it without 'em." I say, "No, we better talk to them an' do the proper way, y' know, because that's what older people like." So after a few days I went with my sister and my brother-in-law an' we sit down an' talked



Farrah G. Farrah at home. Photo by Jean Boughton.

with em— they make a cup of coffee, y' know. Then my brother 'n sister— the older ones are supposed to speak first, that's the old country custom—they tell them all about it. They say, "Farrah wants to get married and he wants to ask for your daughter's hand, and he met her outside and she told him she'll accept. Now would that be all right? You have no objection?"

Well, her father used to come to see me in my own room an' he used to say to me, "You single, you all alone. Why don'tcha get married? Pick one of my daughters." He had two daughters, one a couple years younger than my wife. I says to him, "Not now. Not now." He used to come and find me reading books. I used to love reading, although I didn't play in the street like regular boys. I never liked that and I never had time to meet her because I was studying and learning.

So now her father says "Yes. Sure. We will accept you. We are honored to have you for our son-in-law." They agreed. Well, after we talk it over we plan things for another week and we got the priest an' got married at the house. We didn't go to the church because someone in the family died and we wouldn't want to go to church an' make big weddin's, y' know, just quietly at home.

I lived with her all the time till she died, that's March 10th, 1978, she passed away. I lived with her and got three children. But they don't live with me. One's in Washington and one lives another place. Only one lives with me in the same house, but he's not on the same floor—I got an apartment for myself.

I enjoy living with her all my life as she was really good woman. She was lotta help to me an' . . . (Starts to cry, pauses, composes himself, then continues) an' we were together over fifty-seven, fifty-eight years, a long time.

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### MILDRED HORWITZ

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I met my husband on my vacation. I had two weeks vacation. I think in Wrentham. He was with a couple of boys and I was with a couple of girls. He wouldn't take no for an answer—wouldn't take it. He kept asking me if I wanted to go out, and I wouldn't go. Whenever

he came to the house to take me out, I'd tell my mother to tell him "I'm not home." Between you an' me, she wanted him to come—with five girls in the house, you want to get rid of them. Well, he did it again 'n' again 'n' again and finally I went out.

Now if I was Catholic, I'd never get married. I thought marriage was too big of a responsibility. But being a Jewish girl, my mother wanted to get rid of me. (Laughs.) So, he came along as others came along, and he was the best. The poorest and the best. And we made good in an honest way.

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### ANGELA DICHIARA

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When I was fourteen years old (1909) I went to work in a stocking factory in South Boston. I had to work five and a half days a week for the big pay of three dollars a week and I had to turn over every cent of it to my father. I could not even open my pay envelope. So one morning on my way to work, I met my next door neighbor. He was eighteen and had been in this country a short time and couldn't speak very good English. It seemed I would run into him almost every morning going to work and I took a liking to him. So one morning he said to me, "I like you very much. I would like to marry you someday." I did not know what to say to him because that was the first time a boy ever noticed me. I didn't answer him one way or the other. After a few weeks of seeing him while going to work he said to me "I bought you a ring and I want you to have it." He showed me the ring and it was so beautiful. It had two hearts made of rhinestones. I loved the ring very much but I was afraid to take it. I said "I can't take that ring. My father would kill me for it. He will think all kinds of things." So he said to take it and don't let him see it. I took it but I did not dare leave it around the house.

One morning I was going to the store and it had been raining all night. I got an idea. I rubbed the ring in the mud and when I went home I said to my father, "Look, Pa. I found a pretty ring this morning." With that he said "Let me see it," and he washed it and said, "I



think it's a gold one. I'll pawn it and see how much I can get for it." I asked, "Why can't I keep it? I found it," and he said, "Don't be foolish," and that was the end of the ring. I did not want to tell the boy that got me the ring what happened so I said I lost it and that was the end of my romance. I didn't talk to him no more.

So time went on and we moved to a bigger house and my father took in boarders. I was now fifteen years old, and one of the boarders, about twenty-five years old, fell in love with me. As soon as I got old enough I was to marry him with my father's consent. Then he got a letter from Italy that his father was very sick and might die. His mother told him to take the next ship going to Italy because his father was asking for him every day. He told me he wanted to see his father before he died—this was in November—and that he was leaving for Italy and to please wait for him, at least until April. "If I'm not back by April you can do as you please."

It was around the first of December, 1911, when I met my husband (to be). He said, "What happened to your boyfriend? He left you to see his sick father? Ha, that's a laugh. I bet he went to marry some nice Italian girl." I said, "He told me to wait until April and that's not so long to wait." Then he said, "Why don't you marry me and we'll surprise him."

Well, that put a bug in my ear and he already had been talking to my stepmother. It seemed she wanted me to get married and out of the way so she took care of everything. She found a house for me to live in and she and my husband bought all the furniture and fixed everything up for me while I was working. They talked to my father's best friend and everything was set for my wedding. I was married January 14, 1912.

I did not live alone because my husband had two brothers and a cousin in this country who were living alone so my mother found a house big enough for them to move in with me and after three or four days they came in to live with us, as in those days there was no such thing as a honeymoon. It was as if I had changed bosses. First I had to take orders from my stepmother and my father, and then I took orders from my husband and his brothers, as they were much older than I was. One time a lady met me on the street and said to me, "How

d'ya like married life?" I said, "I'm so lucky. Other girls get married an' have one husband, I get married an' have four of them." Then I says, "I get orders from everybody." I had to wash and cook and clean after them plus I had to go to work to help pay the bills we had made for the wedding. I didn't have a life of roses when I got married, but then after years went by, I became the boss and my husband settled down.

After about six months married I became pregnant and I stopped working and just took care of the house. When about seven months pregnant I still did not know where babies came from, because my mother had died when I was twelve years old and my stepmother did not tell me anything at all. In fact, when I first started to get my period I was so scared I did not know what had happened to me. I thought someone came in while I was sleeping and cut me all up and when my stepmother came in to get me in the morning, I started to cry so much I could not tell her what had happened to me. She pulled the covers off my bed and my bed was a mess. "Is that why you were crying? Why that is nothing, now you become a woman. I get that every month and we get it until we are forty or fifty." I started to cry all the more because I thought it was going to be like one steady thing. Then she finally explained to me that we only get it once a month. That was a relief!

Coming back to me having the baby—I really did not know where babies come from. I thought that my navel was going to open up and the baby come out of there but I was ashamed to ask my husband because he would think I was very stupid. There was a woman living in the same house on the second floor. She was about forty years old at the time so I thought I would ask her.

One day I went to see her and we were having a cup of tea. I said to her, "Will you please tell me where the baby is going to come from?" She laughed and said, "Don't you know the baby is going to come out of your knee." Then I said no more and she said no more. We started to talk about something else, but that did worry me. I kept looking at my knee and I said that must be impossible. So the next day could not come soon enough. I went downstairs and I came right out with it. I said to her, "I hope you were joking when you said the baby was com-



ing out of my knee because I could not sleep all night." She laughed and laughed, saying, "You're not serious that you don't know where the baby comes from?" I said, "yes I am," and she said, "You'll find out soon enough."

The morning of the 27th of April, 1913, was a beautiful day. I finished my housework and the girl that lived on the first floor was sitting on the stoop in the backyard and I thought I would go and keep her company. As I sat down beside her she said to me, "When are you going to have your baby?" I said, "I don't know, I'm ten days late already. I guess it may be anytime." She was a bride of six months and only about sixteen years old and she did not know too much about having babies either. Then she said to me, "It would be nice if you had the baby today."

No sooner had she said that then, bingo, I felt a sharp pain in my back. I must have turned all colors. She asked, "What's wrong with you? You look as if you are in a lot of pain." I said, "I am. I think I'm going to have my baby."

"You mean right now?"

I said, "No, of course not right away. It will take a long time I think. Will you go get my stepmother and tell her to get my husband and for him to go get the midwife." It was like a chain reaction. Everybody had to get someone else. I managed to get upstairs to the top floor. I did not know anything at all—how the pains would stop and keep coming back. I thought it was going to be one big long pain. In the meantime, my stepmother came in all excited and said, "How are you? Are the pains very strong and have you timed them?" I said, "Timed what?" I didn't know anything about timing pains. Then my husband and the midwife came in and she said, "what is all the excitement about? Babies are born everyday, all day long." With that she told me to get on the bed so she could see what time I had before she made me get in bed. She said, "You're doing fine. We'll have this baby before the night is over."

My pains were now getting stronger and closer. It bothered me because they were all laughing and joking and I was the only one suffering. Finally she put me in bed and as I had a bed with posts she made a rope out of a sheet and tied it to the post of the bed and said to

me, "When you get a strong pain you hold on the sheet ends and bear down as much as you can and the baby will come out sooner." She stood by my bedside and she had a bottle of brandy. She gave me a small glassful when the pain was gone saying it would make me stronger for the next pain. Well, about 12:30 on the night of April 27th my first baby was born. It was a girl, and she weighed six pounds and she was beautiful. Now all babies are beautiful to their mothers, but mine was like a little rosebud. She was pink as a rose and in a short time I forgot all about the terrible pains I had, I was so happy to think I had a baby that was all mine. I was so happy I kept looking at her all night. I don't think I slept at all the first night she was born.

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**Lillian Harvey** is seventy-one years old and has been a longtime resident of Brighton

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My aunt had our genealogy looked up and both sides of my family came over on the Mayflower. We're what they call English and Yankee.

We lived in four rooms above a barn in Brookline where my uncle kept his horse 'n' team. The barn was in the backyard of my uncle's house. We had a potbellied stove in the kitchen and that stove would heat the whole four rooms. In the living room we had another smaller stove and a rocking chair where my Dad would tell us stories. I just remember how cozy we were, but I dreaded when we had to go to the bathroom down in the cobwebby cellar.

We were brought up Baptists but once I got into high school I had a lot of homework and I asked my father, "Do I have to go to Sunday School?" He said, "No. You know enough about the Lord now, you don't have to keep going." So instead I started taking walks with my girlfriends, going to Revere Beach or maybe Nantasket and going to band concerts. Once I graduated from high school, I went to work and started going to Loew's State Ballroom in town. I met quite a few young men there but whenever I met anybody and they asked me out I wouldn't go home with them. Before we dated, I'd bring the person to the house and I never went out with anyone until they met my family.

My father was strict about that. He said, "I want to know who you're going with. Who their family is." And everything worked out fine, we—my brother and I—just happened to pick boys and girls that my father and mother liked.

I started to go to Loew's State Ballroom because my brother brought home from his Bible class two or three fellows that were beautiful dancers. They practically taught me how to dance an' after six months of learning I got so I did pretty well. Until I met my husband, life was just going to my work and going dancing three nights a week. Then, in between, I went to the movies.

I never really dated till I was around twenty, twenty-one, so when I was younger I fell in love with the movie stars, especially the romantic ones like Rudolph Valentino. He was my ideal of everything. (Laughs.) And before high school my friends and I used to buy movie magazines for 10 cents and cut out the stars. We'd make books of those stars we favored an' then once a week we'd get together. "I'll give you this one if you'll give me that one," and it was a nice childhood.

I really don't know what else to say. Of course then I married Norman, trying to forget another fellow that I liked very much. The guy nearly died of pneumonia and had to go to Florida for his health. I had two or three letters from him, then I don't know whatever happened. I might have married him if he came back but as it worked out I met my husband. We went together two years and got married, 'n' then I had four children. (Sighs.) An' my life has just been the kids up to about a few years ago when they were all married. Now I'm in my old life and trying to be young again.

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**Dorothy Boyd** is sixty-seven and has been a lifelong resident of West Roxbury and Jamaica Plain.

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My first husband was the brother of the girl I sat next to in high school. He had come to my high school graduation, saw me, and fell for me hook, line and sinker. Then one Sunday after graduation, this girl invited me to her house. Well, I was utterly bewildered because

she had eight brothers and she was the only girl. When I went home I had no idea which brother was who. I had just met a great big pack of boys. Her brother was then three months trying to convince me I should go out with him. In fact, I was thinking yesterday, it was fifty years ago that I had my first date with him.

For our first date he was going to meet me after work an' take me to dinner and a show. Now, I had just started working after being in school, but I hadn't worked long enough that I had amassed any clothes. To remedy this I borrowed my sister's clothing. Well, when you're in somebody else's clothes, you feel a little bit conspicuous. Furthermore, I was seventeen and he was twenty-three and there's an awful big gap between seventeen and twenty-three. And, of course, I'm trying to put on the dog, being really blase and sophisticated, when I was actually a little innocent out of the woods. He had been kicking around a lot longer than I had and he could see right through me. He knew I was putting on.



Dorothy Boyd (far right) with her sister and brother-in-law, 1931, on a summer outing.



We went to a Chinese restaurant and it cost us a dollar and a quarter for a full meal. Then we went to the Metropolitan Theatre and we were home by nine o'clock because we met right after work. When we got home, I asked him if he'd like to come in. He was astounded because of all the girls he'd ever gone with, nobody'd ever invited him in after a date. He wondered what kind of a girl I was.

In my family everybody was invited in. We had a house and my parents believed in having everybody at the house. Furthermore, we were not allowed, under any circumstances, to go out with a boy if our parents hadn't met him. The boy had to come to the door and get you. They didn't sit there and toot the car horn—well, they didn't have cars anyway. My mother said if they care enough to take my daughters out, they can ring the doorbell, come in and meet your parents.

Somewhere along the line I latched onto a boy that had a car, a rattle-trap Model T. And oh boy, a boy friend with a car! His name was Jimmy and he came up in his Model T, rang the doorbell, came in and met my mother. Then my mother said, "You may go out with Jimmy but not in the car."

Well, some while after that I found out more about Jimmy and I'm just as glad that I didn't go out in the car. Apparently my mother could see a lot that I wasn't seeing. But I'll never forget that terrible, terrible blow, "You can go out but not in the car."

We had good times on dates but sleeping together wasn't the thing to do. My mother had talked to me and told me the "facts of life" but it was just unthinkable that I would get involved with anything like that. I just pushed it out of my mind, thinking "These are 'facts' but they don't relate to me. They have nothing to do with me."

*Do you think you were at a disadvantage when you finally did get married, not having any sexual experience?*

I don't think so. Uh, it's hard to say. My kids have asked me and my grandchildren, in a sense, but you can't really put one generation into another generation because, if you're saying it would be hard knowing as little as I did to get married today that's one thing. But at that period nobody else was doing these things. It wasn't common knowledge. There wasn't television, there wasn't radio to any extent.

There weren't ads in the paper, there weren't all kinds of contraceptives, there wasn't anything. We were probably more knowledgeable than our parents were. At least we knew something. But you just sort of fumbled your way. As I say, I knew facts. The facts were there in front of me and I had read numerous books about things but it just wasn't the thing to do. I mean I don't know how else I can explain it. You were a bad girl in those days if anything ever happened. Today, it's nothing to be a single parent, but then, it was *unthinkable*.

I can remember some girl that I knew when I went to school was going to have a baby and *I couldn't believe this!* I couldn't believe that anybody that I knew would do that. So my boyfriend—'cause, as I say, he was six years older and that's a lot of difference—he said, "Listen. There's just as many good and bad and indifferent people among your friends as there are among anybody's. You know, you have average friends too." But I just didn't believe this. My friends aren't going to do these things. Y'know? You were, you were just the social outcast. And I can't say if I was fifty years younger what I would be doing. I know I've had to update my thinking some, because if you're going to live you've got to. But I can't update it all the way that things have gone today. I think they've spoiled it for themselves.

A marriage used to mean something. You were going to have something, your whole life was going to change. These people that have sex at twelve an' thirteen an' fourteen—some of them say, "Oh, I had sex with every boy I knew." When you get married there just isn't anything different that's going to happen. When we got married, your whole world was going to change because there was a whole different element in there that had never been in your life before. That isn't so for people today. I mean a lot of people live together two or three years, then they decide to get married. When I got married that was a beautiful thing to me, it was a whole great big beautiful change of life. Today it isn't. It's a continuation of what they've been doing since they were teenagers or earlier. They get married and maybe go away for a honeymoon or maybe not but they go right on working and nothing changes. When we got married the whole life was different. *Do you think the change has come because women now have more opportunities, e.g., they can find work, have a career, etc.?*



Yes. That's a lot of it. But I think that everybody, everybody's trying to keep up with everybody else and everybody feels that they have to have everything. I think television plays a very important part in that because all day long TV's constantly bombarding you with the things that you need, the things you've *got to have*, you can't live without the vacuum cleaner or some new kind of an oven or some kind of a face cream. From the time a child is a little thing, they're pounding it into him the things they've got to have. It's a constant. But we didn't have any time to read the paper. We didn't know what we didn't have. That was the whole point, we didn't have it so we didn't miss it.

There's something I just thought of. When people used to say to you, "How do you like married life?", well, back in that day when somebody said that to me, what I thought they were saying in essence was, "How do you like sex?" Now today, they wouldn't think of that but when somebody said that to me, the first thing that I'd think was "What am I supposed to say?" If you say you like it, that's not the right thing to say because a woman wasn't supposed to like it, a woman was supposed to accept it. That was part of her wifely duties. Period. There wasn't supposed to be any enjoyment. That wasn't part of the deal.

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**Eldridge (Steve) Henderson** is sixty-six years old. He was born in Macon, Georgia, has lived in Washington, D.C. and presently resides in the South End.

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When I was about twenty—this was in the early 1930s now—I used to do everything I could think of that wasn't right. (Laughs.) Well, I'll tell you what I found interesting, going out with girls. *That was my greatest interest.*

*Did you get married right away?*

No, no. I didn't get married until I was thirty years old. I played around and had a ball.

*How did you go about dating in those days?*

Well, (laughing) the only thing I can tell you is—find a girl you like and see if she likes you. That's the only thing I know. You'd go out

if the girl was old enough. 'Course I used to try and be a grown man before I was, y' know. I jumped my age up and I went with older girls because I was always a tall guy. I could get away with being older 'cause I was so tall.

*Sexual morality has changed quite a bit since the 1930s. Things are a lot looser now. Single men and women sleep together and . . .*

(Interrupting) Well, actually it was *no different* in that respect except they're doing it differently now. 'Course that's been going on all the time. Man meets girl and girl meets man. They go out together an' get in a spot where they can be together—that's been going on since time began. But now they're doing it more out in the open. Once upon a time you had to be very careful not to let other people know what you were doing. Today people don't care one way or the other. They don't care anymore. So it's more out in the open but it's been going on all the time.

*Did people consider you "bad" or immoral for acting as you did?*

Well, I was never "bad" and I never thought of myself that way, but that don't mean I was an angel. But, like I said, you had a different way of doing things back in those days and I would *never ever* let any of my neighbors or any of my family know that I was slipping out with girls. I was just "mother's boy—I wouldn't do that." *But I did it though!* I'd just keep it very far away from them, y'see. Nowadays, it's done—no matter if it's family, neighbors, friends or what. It's done right out in the open and nobody attaches any moral value to it. I did these things but I was very careful how I did them.

*I understand you were married four times.*

Yes. (Laughs.)

*Sounds like you had a good time.*

Oh, I've had a good time all my life. Yeah, I've never lacked for a good time—ever since I can remember. Y' know, for some people it's impossible. They don't have the right attitude. You need a proper outlook on humanity. You look at people, you stop being a gripe, you stop being nasty. You take people as friends until they prove otherwise. Don't jump to conclusions about people, know what I mean?

That's what I think is the right attitude. I mean don't get prejudiced, don't preach and don't discriminate.

I think I'm different in some ways because, as I said previously, some people when they get my age and above become quite conservative. I'm not too conservative. I like to get out and get around and meet people. Some old people are kind of gripey, y' know, set in their ways but I'm different from that. I like to meet people of all stripes, of all ages, of all everything. I can move in and meet and greet anyone, I don't care who they may be. It's just something I've always been and I can't get over it.

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## DIVORCE, WOMEN AND WORK—A DISCUSSION

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The following women contributed to this discussion: Dorothy Boyd, Alice Dunlap, Peg Gilroy, Kay Kelly, Mary McGrath, Gertrude Morgan, Louise Pozzoglio, Mary Quintaglie and Winnifred Walsh.

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*Mary Q:* My daughter has a friend who is divorced and she's living with someone and it's all open today. It's accepted now and she's a Catholic. In fact, she tried to get married in the Catholic Church and they wouldn't let her. But she is not a run-around. She's just with one person.

*Louise P:* Years ago, during the 1920s and 30s, you didn't hear too much about divorce then. And if someone did become divorced, they were divorced and that was it. They didn't find another friend or whatever, you know what I mean. I think too, a lot of women in that time might have wanted to get away or get divorced, but you'd wonder, "Well, where would I go if I didn't have any money of my own?"

*Mary M:* Divorced women weren't accepted like today.

*Louise P:* Not even the acceptance part. I think it was "How am I going to live?" Whereas today, If you suddenly say, "This is it. I can't take any more of this!" you can go off somewhere and you can find help. In those days if you didn't go home to momma or poppa, I mean,

where could you go? Today there are places you can go. For example, you can go into welfare and they will ask you, "Do you have money? Can you get along? If not, do you need money? But then I think you thought twice. I mean it really had to be a *horrible life*.

*Do you think a lot of women didn't get divorced just for those reasons?*

*Were they very unhappy but decided to stick with it?*

*(Group):* I think so. (Chorus of agreement.)

*Winnifred W:* What I remember about it was that divorced women were more or less looked down on by society. They used to talk about the "gay divorcee." I don't know why, but they thought once she was divorced, y' know, she became real gay and ran around. That's the part I remember, but now they don't look at it that way. I'm Catholic myself and, of course, they didn't believe in divorce. A lot of them stayed with their mate but I think today it's much better because if you're not happy it's better to be separated.

*Mary M:* I agree with Winnifred. I believe in divorce although I don't know of anybody who has divorced. It's a terrible crime to make a woman live with a man that she detests while trying to bring up her children. That's a terrible crime. But in the years gone by, I remember people did look down on divorcees.

*Winnifred:* Never on the man, *the woman!*

*Dorothy B:* Yes, it was us. Another thing that was unfair to people divorced in those days—there were so few things you could get a divorce on that people lied through their teeth. And you had to lie, y' know. Today you can just say, "We don't get along and we want to break up." But boy, they really had to have some real hard evidence in those days and they really trumped up some terrible lies and it was always against the woman. It was always the woman's fault. A lot of women stuck it out rather than have all those lies told in court so that they could get a divorce. They stuck it out rather than go through that. Today, you don't have to do that. You don't have to prove infidelity and all that kind of stuff.

I think one of the problems today is that back when I got married and when my parents got married, you expected to stay together for the rest of your lives. That's what going to the altar meant. Today, a



lot of young people don't have that attitude. They get married with the idea, "Well, if it doesn't work, we'll split up," or "So it didn't work, so what." I mean it's a whole different attitude from the very beginning.

And don't think we didn't have our problems—I know I did. Everybody does and anybody that says any different is lying because everybody gets to the point—"Why did I ever want him?" You'd like to take him and throw him out the window. I mean there are days and *there are days*. But we still got married with the idea that we are going to stay married. I don't think anybody got married in those days saying, "Baby, I'm only going to have one child and this and that." Those days you got married, you had a family and you raised that family for better or worse. Today, these things aren't important. I think this change shows up partly in the kind of marriage ceremonies that I have heard go on. Like I know somebody that recently got married up in the Arboretum and they wrote the whole service themselves. Well, in my days you didn't do that. You went to church and you got married there. Now people get married in airplanes, they write these hippy services and have all kinds of different ceremonies, but to us it was a sacred, solemn thing that we were doing. Today, it's just part of the game and if it doesn't work, so what. I think the whole way you go into it affects the divorce rate.

*Winnifred*: I don't think the way they do things now is the best way to do things, because the family is the backbone of the nation and they're more or less doing away with it. But a lot of the things they're doing today are really good, like they're giving women more rights and that sort of thing.

*Would you say a little more about that?*

*Winnifred*: Well, one is the women can vote, they've been voting for years. They can have equal wages if they do a job as well as a man or are capable of doing it. In the office where I worked, we had several men lawyers and they used to say they wouldn't give a woman lawyer the same money they gave a man. Now I think a woman would get it, they'd get a better break.

*Mary M.*: I was always treated well in business but I know that men

resented any position you had above them. That was kind of hard for me. They'd say I shouldn't have my job—they should!

*Have any of you noticed other changes over the years?*

*Louise P.*: There have been positive changes in the line of employment. Women are driving buses, so they must be acceptable to the MBTA. And I've seen women riding in telephone trucks and delivering mail.

*Alice D.*: Well, I think that more women should stay home and look after their children instead of going out and working. I really do. I think if you have a husband, let the husband support you. That's the way I was brought up. My father supported us and we had everything. We didn't have everything under the sun, but y'know, my father worked and my mother stayed home and looked after us. But today, I think there's too many women trying to be like men, you might say. Go out and take the men's jobs. I think if a man wants to get married let him support the woman he's going to take. And if he wants children, let him support them. But today, they have it all around. 'Round me, everybody's out working, and of course there's a lot of women go out and work and the husband just stays home and drinks.

*Dorothy B.*: I have three married children with children of their own and I can see how their way of life is quite different. Two of my daughter-in-laws work, one has five children, one has four, and granted, with that many children you need a good income. One works as a nurse and they have a nice home and a nice family. But she's not there when the kids get home from school! This is the thing. When I got home from school my mother was there. "Change your clothes, put on your playclothes." And then we'd get a slice of bread and molasses or bread, butter and sugar. My grandchildren think I was really underprivileged, but this is the type of thing we would get. Their mother works from seven to three so she isn't too far behind them when they come home and their father sees them off on the schoolbus, but it's not the same as having a mother there when the kids get home. And I'm sure those kids fight because I know we fought. I don't know, but I think there's something about having a mother there when you come home. We used to run home and say, "Look at the



papers we made!" or "I'm going to be in the Christmas pageant!" There was something you could burst in with and tell your mother.

But now they're home first and you've locked up the house and they can't get in. And I'm not criticizing just my own children, because this is the modern way of life, most of the young today are working. They had their children and they took care of them when they were little and then they start working.

*Mary Q.:* I see it the same way. My daughter has to send her two children to a parochial school in Brookline because she does not think the Boston schools are up to par. It costs her \$550 plus carfare, lunches and books.

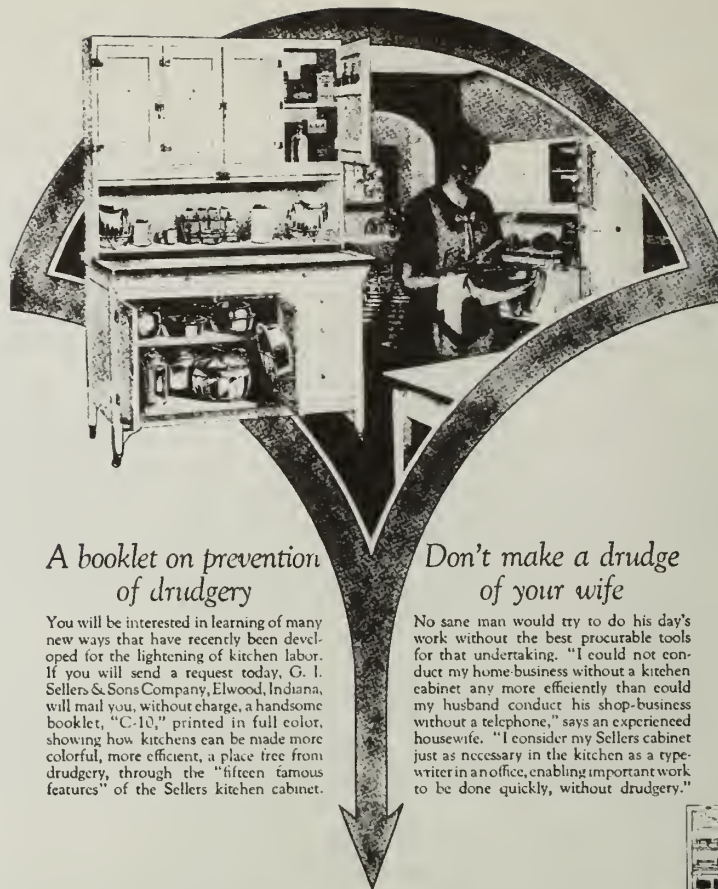
*So you're saying that in order for her to get the education she wants for her children she has to work.*

*Mary Q.:* Yes, the schools aren't up to par. She has one that's going to pre-kindergarten and he's going to take the test for first grade in January 1979. But he'll also have to go to school in Brookline and she'll have to put out a lot of money. Her husband at the present time isn't even working but she's working as a bus monitor so that helps pay the bills off.

*Mary M.:* Times are so different now, and young people want so much, *you have to give up something.*

*Dorothy B. (Interrupting):* That's what the problem is, I think they get too much. My grandchildren get entirely too much. I know they do.

*Mary M. (Continuing):* I think that young women, young men, they want this, they want that. Well, there's no way of getting that unless the wife works, because a man can't buy things if, say, he makes two or three hundred a week. So you have to give up something, and it's up to the individual what he wants to give up. If you want to give up being with your children and naturally when they become sixteen or seventeen and they're gone anyway, people say, "Well, fine. We can sacrifice that. Let's get a house." I know a number of friends whose children think that way. They buy \$48,000 houses on \$300 a week and you can't do that on one income, so the wife works. She gives up her freedom so they can get what they want.



### *A booklet on prevention of drudgery*

You will be interested in learning of many new ways that have recently been developed for the lightening of kitchen labor. If you will send a request today, G. I. Sellers & Sons Company, Elwood, Indiana, will mail you, without charge, a handsome booklet, "C-10," printed in full color, showing how kitchens can be made more colorful, more efficient, a place free from drudgery, through the "fifteen famous features" of the Sellers kitchen cabinet.

### *Don't make a drudge of your wife*

No sane man would try to do his day's work without the best procurable tools for that undertaking. "I could not conduct my home-business without a kitchen cabinet any more efficiently than could my husband conduct his shop-business without a telephone," says an experienced housewife. "I consider my Sellers cabinet just as necessary in the kitchen as a typewriter in an office, enabling important work to be done quickly, without drudgery."

# SELLERS

KITCHEN CABINETS

"Don't make a drudge of your wife." Advertisement in  
*Collier's Magazine* (September 25, 1926).

*Would you say people today have higher expectations in terms of what they want than your generation?*

*Mary M.:* Oh, definitely people won't give up anything today. Who was the family that had a car in our day? Now, two or three people in a family each have a car.

*Dorothy B.:* I think that kids should have much less than they have. To my mind, people don't have anything to work for. When I was growing up, we weren't poor, but we didn't have what they have now. And when we got married, we didn't have that much and there was always things to work for. We were married four years before we got a secondhand car. And that was a big deal! We paid \$225 for that car and thought we had accomplished something. Today the kids have a car at sixteen.

*Louise P.:* I don't know how it got that way—people wanting a lot of things—but don't you think that living is so expensive today—what with rents, food an' everything, that women do have to work if their husbands aren't professionals? I don't think you can find an apartment in any neighborhood for less than \$200 a month. And then you have to heat it and clean it. So maybe a woman is forced to go out.

*(To group)* *Do you think women have it harder today?*

*Kay K.:* No.

*Peg G.:* Well, I think it is harder today because women are involved in more things which means taking care of home and children *and being*

*involved outside.* They're doing more and are under more tension. They're taking their kids to special schools—they won't let their kids take the buses, y' know—and then if they work they don't work near their home. Years ago a woman could work nearby and come home and fix the kid's lunches and go back to work. But not today. If you don't have a car today you can't go anywhere. So I think it's harder.

*Kay K.:* Well, I agree with what Peg says about today's woman but I was thinking of my mother's time. She didn't have a washing machine. And it wasn't until years and years later that she got a refrigerator. She had a black coal stove and a hand iron—you had to heat the iron on the stove—and she washed clothes on a washboard.

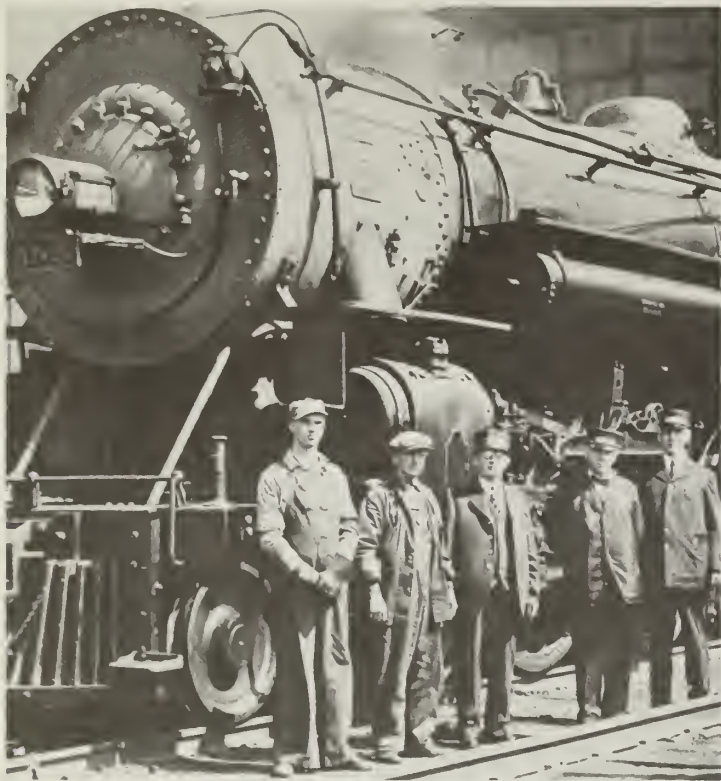
*Peg G.:* But you had the time, you had the time, Kay.

*Kay K.:* Well, the mother wasn't going out to work, she wasn't going out to a lot of clubs. It was the home life that occupied her. The modern mother is gone. She belongs to this club or that club, ceramics, Weight Watchers . . . .

*Peg G.:* Yeah. I think the home life was their whole life years ago. The husband, the kids, and the house. They had no other interests but their house and their kids. It was their whole life.

*Gertrude, was it harder years ago?*

*Gertrude M.:* Yes. I don't know how they stood it. It was slavery. Women were slaves. My mother died washing clothes over a washboard. She was forty-nine years old. No matter what women have to do now, it's much better.



Mary Pickford,  
a 1920s movie starlet.  
Boston Public Library  
Print Department.

*Left:* Working the B & M. Boston Public Library Print Department.

*Middle:* Tom Mix, 1930s-40s movie actor. Boston Public Library Print Department.

*Upper right:* An early airplane. Boston Public Library Print Department.



# CHAPTER IV

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“NOT SO LONG AGO:  
Oral Histories of Older Bostonians”

## IN THE FAMILY — A WOMAN’S EXPERIENCE



Angela DiChiara holding her wedding portrait. Photo by Jean Boughton.

This chapter is excerpted from Angela DiChiara’s autobiography. Her story ranges over a span of years from 1915 through the present, beginning just after the birth of her first daughter. Small and large tragedies plague this family, some of them “acts of God,” as in the death of her husband’s father, but many of them unnecessary, more the result of class position than “bad luck.” For example, her husband’s job-related accident could have been prevented had employers been less cavalier about industrial safety; or Angela having to hide her children from the landlord in order to rent an apartment is a humiliation no wealthy family would have to suffer.

As you read Angela’s story you can also see how social, technological and economic changes impinge on the life of a single family. Doctors replace midwives, folk medicine gives way to modern remedies, automobiles lead to more distant family living arrangements, urban redevelopment bulldozes Angela’s home and a later breakdown of community and increase in crime force her to

move again. Much of the history of modern Boston is reflected in Angela’s story yet amidst it all she survives and sustains her home and family.

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### ACCIDENT AND DEATH — 1915

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*Angela’s story picks up from where it left off in Chapter III.*

We moved to another house on Dorchester Ave. in South Boston and we were now getting along very nice. My husband was making nine dollars a week and I was able to save two dollars a week towards expenses. Everything seemed to be going very good. The baby was now almost twenty months and I was pregnant again. I was about three months pregnant when one morning, on the 15th of December, 1915, it seemed that the world came to an end for me. My husband and his brother and his father had left for work as any other morning but not even one hour had passed when my brother-in-law ran in the house and said to me, “Your husband just got run over by a train. I

don't know if he is dead or alive. I couldn't stand to look and all I know is that he was on the ground. I ran all the way home." I started to scream and then don't know what happened. I must of fainted because I was sitting near the window and when I opened my eyes my house was full of people and my cousin was there. She had come from Italy three or four weeks before. So me and her ran all the way over the Dover Street Bridge and that morning it must of been five below zero. The wind was so strong that the tears were sticking to my face. We finally got to the Boston City Hospital and I was crying so much I could hardly talk straight. It took a little while to compose myself. I told the man at the desk that my husband was run over by a train. I did not know if he was dead or alive. He felt very bad for me and said "You sit here and I will find out for you." I waited for about ten minutes and they were the worst ten minutes of my life, because one word would have made the world of a difference. When he came back I started to shake all over. Then he said, "I am sorry, he is not here — dead or alive — but wait here and I will call all the hospitals for you and we will find him one way or another." Finally, he came back with a smile on his face. He said, "I found him and he is in the Mass. General Hospital." I cannot remember how I got there but when I got there he was in the operating room and I made such a fuss and was crying so much that the head doctor said I could go in and see him for just for a minute. But when I saw him he was lying on a glass table and had a big towel wrapped around his foot and it was all covered with blood. I was so happy that he was alive that I did not even ask him how bad he was hurt. I went home with my cousin. Friends and relatives kept coming and going for a few days and my cousin stayed and slept with me and my little girl.

It was Christmas Day and I went to see my husband. They had moved him from the Mass. General Hospital to a convalescent home in Waverley, Mass. When I got there he was crying because they had operated on him and they had cut off half of his foot. He told me he heard the doctors talking about operating on him again. So I went to look for the doctor in charge and told him what my husband overheard. The doctor said, "Your husband heard right. You see the back of his foot is dead. He has no feeling in it at all, so we have de-



Angela DiChiara on her 84th birthday. Photo by Jean Boughton.



cided to amputate six inches below the knee." I asked whether he'd be all right after that operation, and he said, "I hope so." I went back to my husband to talk to him and told him not to worry, everything was the will of God. He could of been dead but God spared his life.

I took the streetcar home and was crying all the way home. I had to bring home more bad news to his poor father and sister and his brothers. That was a very sad Christmas for us.

They took him back to the Mass. General the next day and operated on him the day after. I did not go see him for a few days as I felt as they were cutting my heart out. I waited until he felt a little like talking before I went to see him and, God bless him, he took it much better than any of us in the family. He gave me courage instead of me giving it to him.

Now it was time for him to leave the hospital, so me and his two brothers went to pick him up. I lived in a big apartment house on the top floor. He had to come up four flights of stairs on crutches for the first time and my heart was aching for him. It took us about half an hour before we got up the stairs.

They told me at the hospital I was to take him back two times a week for treatments and, believe me, it was not an easy job for him going up and down the stairs, and on and off streetcars. It was a long dragged-out thing and the leg did not seem to heal. The doctor taking care of him could not understand why the leg was not healing as it should and I was going to the hospital almost two or three months with him.

One day in the middle of September, 1916, some friends of ours came to see us and we were talking about my husband's leg and how it was not healing. One of our friends said that he knew of a doctor that specialized in those kind of operations. The very next day me and my husband went to his office. When he came in I explained to him how the leg did not seem to heal. He put my husband on the table, looked at the leg, shook his head and said, "The doctor that did this did it all wrong. First of all he cut the bone too long and he did not have enough skin to go around the bone. That is the main reason it is not healing. If you want me to take care of him I will have to put him back in the hospital for two weeks and cut off about three more inches of

bone so I can have enough skin to stick around that bone."

I put my husband in the hospital the next day and he was operated on. The doctor told me when I went in that everything went fine and that in one week he could take out the stitches and my husband would be able to go home.

In the meantime his father got sick, and worrying about his son did not help. He went to work one morning not feeling good. I had told him to stay home but he went anyway, and then he came home with the chills and soon he started to shake. I put him to bed and called in a doctor. When the doctor came he said he had a fever of 103° and was a very sick man. I walked out the door with the doctor and asked, "How bad is he?" He said he had pneumonia.

One week to the day he got sick, my husband's father died. The doctor that operated on my husband came down to see the father two or three days before he died and told me that he would not last more than a few days. He also told me not to tell my husband anything about his father's dying because he was doing fine and if he heard about his father it would upset him so much that he might get a setback. His father was dying and nothing could be done about it but my husband was alive and we should try to help him.

I was now faced with his father's funeral and not much money and my husband in the hospital with half of his leg off. All I can say is that God gave me the strength to go on and not fall to pieces. My husband's brothers and his cousin took care of the funeral arrangements. We only kept him in the house one day and one night because someone of the family had to go to the hospital. My husband knew that his father was sick but he never dreamed that when he came home from the hospital his father would be dead and buried. My husband was to come home in three or four days from the hospital and I had to go to see him. When I got to the hospital the first thing he asked was how was his father doing and I had to tell him that his father was very sick. I felt like a traitor lying to my husband. Telling him that his father was sick when he was actually buried, but what else could I do. Those were the doctor's orders.

Now it was time for my husband to leave the hospital to come home. I did not know how we were going to tell him about his father's



death. I asked the doctor what we should do and he said he'd better know before he gets home or the shock of not finding him home might not be so good for him. None of his brothers or his sister wanted to go pick him up from the hospital and tell him about his father being dead and I did not want to go either because I could not face him after lying to him about his father. I did not know what to do, so I asked one of my husband's friends if he would pick my husband up from the hospital as no one in the family had the courage to tell him about his father's death and the doctor said he must know before he gets home. I told the friend to tell my husband in a nice way about his father's death and make him understand that the doctor said for us not to tell him anything because it would upset him too much.

So this poor man had the task of doing this all by himself and he said he would do his best to tell him before he gets home, but when he got to the hospital my husband was all dressed and sitting on a chair. He looked so happy to get home, I can just imagine how that poor man felt when he had to give him the news about his father. But when my husband did not see anybody from his family he said to his friend, "What happened at home? Why is nobody from my family here to pick me up?" He said to my husband, "I will explain it all to you on the way home." He helped him in the taxi and they started for home. Then my husband asked, "When are you going to tell me what happened at home?" and he looked at him and the friend said, "I would give anything not to tell you what I have to say. You see things at home are different. You must take things easy for a while and must not take things too hard, it will not be good for you." So with that my husband said, "I think the worst thing was me losing my leg," and his friend said, "I know that is a terrible thing losing a leg but there is all kind of trouble that we must expect. What I am trying to tell you is not going to be easy. You see your father is not home. He died when you were being operated on and the doctor told the family not to let you know as it would of been very bad for you. You could not get upset and there was nothing you could have done to save him and something could happen to you."

But as it was he took it very bad. He said, "My poor father came

all the way to America to see me and to think he died and could not see me and I could not see him. I hope I will have the strength to make the stairs when I get home." When he got in the house everybody was waiting for him. Relatives and friends were there and it was like a funeral all over again. Everybody started to cry and my poor husband was sobbing like a baby. I could not control him. He looked at me and said, "I trusted you and you lied to me. You said my father was sick and he was buried. Oh, how could you," and he put his head in my lap and he cried like a baby.

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## INSURANCE CLAIM

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It was in the month of October, 1916, and it was time for my husband to get his artificial leg and we found out they were made on Hanover Street in Boston. So one morning I left the children with my cousin and we went by streetcar. When we got there the man was very nice. He gave my husband a chair right away and he started to take action. First he looked at my husband's leg and then he got a big pan and put a bag of plaster of paris in the pan. Then he put some water in it and mixed it up and put a big stocking over the leg and started to put layers of that plaster over the stocking. The plaster got hard very fast. He then pulled the stocking off and it looked to me like a big bottle with no bottom on it. Finally I said to the man, "Is this the way you will make the leg for my husband?" He looked at me, smiled and said, "You see I had to make an impression of his leg. Now we make it out of wood and attach the foot on. He will put the stump of his leg inside, the same way you would put on a high boot."

I said to him, "How long will it take to make it?" and he said, "Not too long. In about one week it should be ready." With that we left for home. On the way home I said to my husband, "I think it is about time I should go to the claims department of the railroad to see what they intend to do." That very same day I left him home because he was tired and I took the streetcar and I went to South Station where the claims department was. When I got there one of the men in charge

said to me, "May I help you?" and I said, "You sure can." I began to tell him all about my husband. He said, "Oh, yes, we have it here on record. The company would like to settle the claim out of court," and I said, "I don't understand. Will you please explain it to me." He then said, "We will pay all the hospital bills and the doctor bills, pay for his wooden leg and give him his job back, plus we will pay every day he has been out of work. How does that sound? I've figured it out; with nine months out of work it would come to about \$450. We'll make it an even five hundred and give it to you in one lump sum." I said, "Oh, that's fine, but who is paying for the loss of my husband's leg?" With that he said, "Well, what do you want? If you are not satisfied go do as you please."

So I went home and told my husband the news I got and that we should not settle for that and I was going to do something about it. I decided to have a talk with the doctor that operated on him. When I told the doctor the story he said, "Well, I do not know too much about these things but I will give you the name of my lawyer." The very next day I went to see the lawyer and told him just what they told me at the claim department of the railroad. He put it like this, "If I don't get you more than they offered you, without going to court, you will not have to give me one cent." With that I said, "I want you to make sure that you get him a lifetime job because you see my husband never had any schooling. He came in this country when he was only eighteen years old and went right to work on the railroad and that is the only kind of work he can do." With that he said, "I will do my very best for you but whatever amount of money we get I will take one third." In less than one week he called me and said he wanted me and my husband to come to his office. He had some papers for us to sign. When we got there he said, "I have some good news for you. Remember what you told me the amount of money they offered you, and what you said about getting him a job? Well," he said, "I have all that plus five hundred dollars more for you. All in all I got \$1,500 and I told you my fee was one third of what I got for you." Well I was more than satisfied compared to what they had offered me and it was all settled out of court and he got his job back doing whatever he could do.

It was now 1919. I was going to have my fourth child and I was almost in my eighth month of pregnancy. One morning in the month of July, I decided to go over to my next door neighbor's to see her. I had the baby in my arms as she had been so sick I babied her more or less. I was standing on the threshold of the door when the door slammed on my back and I went down three or four stairs. The first thing I thought was to raise the baby up so she would not hit the yard which was cement, but I went down on my stomach with the force of the door that pushed me. I could not get up so I was just lying there for a few seconds when a neighbor happened to come over and she saw me and the baby on the ground and she said, "My God! What are you doing on the ground?" I said, "What do you think? Am I watching the birds fly by? I fell down the stairs and I cannot get up." She helped me up and we went into the house and then she asked me how I felt. I said I really did not know but I did not feel right. With that she thought we should get the doctor so she went next door and told my landlady what had happened and the landlady called up her doctor and the doctor was down in less than an hour. He examined me and he said he didn't feel the baby's heartbeat at all. "I should take the baby from you. I will help you all I can so please don't worry. I will do my very best to save that baby. But I will have to put you to sleep so I will need your husband here so he can sign." My sister-in-law lived down the street and the doctor said I should send for her. He wanted a member of the family to be there to help him. Someone went for my husband and he came home in no time at all as he was working close to the house. My poor husband did not know what happened. When he walked in the house he saw quite a few people in the bedroom and then he saw the doctor. He said, "Mama Mia, what is going on in here?" The doctor explained to him that I fell down the stairs and he thought the baby inside of me was hurt. It would be best if he took the baby from me. With that my husband said, "All right doctor, do your best and save my wife! You see I have three small children and they need their mother." So the doctor put me in bed and right away they



put the cone of ether on my face. I could not breathe at all and was so scared I pulled one hand as they were holding me down. Then I slapped the doctor right across the face and his glasses went flying across the room. With that he took that thing off my face and said, "What did you do that for? You know I must do this to put you to sleep." I said, "Yes doctor, but please let me breathe a little once in a while." So he put the cone back on me and I do not know what happened. I went to sleep and I think I was dying because in my sleep I was flying on a swing and it seemed to me that a great big man would come and push me and I would go flying in the air. I would keep losing my breath and it seemed to me that I was on that swing three days and the third day when that man came I looked at him and said, "You are not going to push me over there. You can see I am getting off this swing right now," and with that I let go of the rope that I had in my hands. I opened my eyes and it turns out that the "rope" I had in my hands was the sheet of the bed. I was holding it in my hands and would not let go. I looked around and everybody was standing around the room. I said, "What happened to me, why is everybody here?" My stepmother came over first and she kissed me and said, "Thank God you came back to us. You see you were dying and the priest gave you the last rites." I said, "Oh dear. But what happened to the baby?" and just then my husband came in the room and said, "Oh thank God he sent you back to me and the children. We need you so much," and I said, "But what happened to my baby?" He said "The baby was hurt very bad, it lived almost twelve hours and we had it baptized and we named her after you. She was a beautiful little girl, but God knows best," and I said, "Where was I when all this was going on?" My husband said "You were fighting to come back to us for three days and I thank God again you made it."

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### DELIVERING A BABY

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My sister-in-law was seven months pregnant when she moved out and it was now around Christmastime so she was about to have her baby. One morning my brother-in-law came up and asked if I would go and stay with his wife. She was starting to have pains and he was go-

ing to get the doctor. I said, "Go ahead and go. I will be right over." With that, I entrusted my oldest girl, who was now almost twelve years old, with my other children. When I got over to my sister-in-law's house she was sitting on a chair near the stove as it was a very cold morning in December and she was crying. I said, "Are your pains that bad?" She said they were coming every five minutes. The lady who was living upstairs where my sister-in-law lived was also down there. I said to my sister-in-law, "Why don't you get in bed and let me see what is going on," because by now I had seen plenty of babies born. It seemed when anybody had a baby and I happened to live near by they would send for me because hardly any of them could speak English. I would help the doctor because I was about the only one that could translate.

When she got in bed I took one look and there was the baby's head crowning. I called to the other woman and said, "Look, the baby is almost here." With that she said, "Oh dear, I am not staying. If anything goes wrong I do not want to be blamed," and with that, God bless her wherever she may be, she walked out and my poor sister-in-law was crying for help. I said to her, "Just tell me where I can get a scissors and some white string and a few diapers," and I put them on the bed next to me. I told her, "Now go ahead and push" and the baby came out. Then I said, "Dear God, if you ever helped anybody, please help me now." I picked up the baby by the feet and give it a good whack on the bun and the baby gave a loud cry. "Thank God. The baby is alive." I put the baby on the bed and I cut the cord and tied it about two inches from the navel. I put the baby in a blanket in the crib and I gave my sister-in-law a paper bag and I said blow in it as much as you can, and she did and with that the afterbirth came out with no trouble at all.

Now it was a clean-up job but still there was no sign of my brother-in-law or the doctor so I got some clean sheets and blankets and told my sister-in-law to roll over and I cleaned up the bed and cleaned her up, nice and clean. Now she was all set. I had put some olive oil on the back of the stove and it was just warm enough to use and I cleaned and dressed the baby and put it in the crib. I just had put all those messy clothes in the wash when in walks the doctor with my



brother-in-law. The doctor said, "How is everything?" I said, "Oh doctor, you are just a little too late. The show is over."

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## BABY BOY

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It was now 1928 and sure enough I was having my tenth pregnancy because my husband wanted a little boy so bad. Every time I had a baby he would say to me "I just wish this one would be a boy," but it seemed the Lord kept on blessing me with girls. Now I had a half dozen girls but my husband still did not give up hope. He used to say "One day my little boy will come along. You just wait and see." Well, in 1928 I finally had my baby boy. I had a very hard time having the baby. My husband stayed out of work for two days to be with me when the baby was born. It seemed I would go so far and then the pains would stop. After twenty-four hours of that, one of the neighbors said to my husband, "I know it is none of my business but if it was me I would change doctors and call in someone else." That morning my husband was very upset. He said he could not stay out of work any longer but my stepmother happened to come over from Arlington and she was just in time for the excitement. They called in a doctor from the hospital and she was a woman doctor.

She examined me and said, "Your baby is caught and it has to be turned around." When I had a pain she would turn the baby and in a few hours the baby was born. It was a nine pound boy and thank God he was in perfect health. He was born December 4, 1928. I had my baby boy and now there was six girls and one boy. My husband got the news as he was coming up the street and everybody on the street was so happy for me that I finally got my baby boy.

When my husband walked in the house my mother greeted him at the door and said, "Congratulations, you are the father of a beautiful baby boy," and he said, "I don't believe it. It's all right if it's another girl. I really don't mind. I'm used to having baby girls." My mother said, "I'm not kidding you." With that he came in the room

and said to me, "Is it really a boy?" I said, "Why don't you look for yourself?" He told my mother to take off the diaper and only then was he sure. He went out and bought all kinds of drinks and he called in all the neighbors and did he celebrate the birth of his son.

Now my baby was about four months old. It was a very nice day in the middle of April and I had not taken the baby out all winter for fear he would get a cold. I thought I would like to take him out now. I happened to look out the window and saw a friend of mine across the street with her baby. So I went out with my baby and sat next to her and we started to talk about our babies and how well they were getting along. But in about ten or fifteen minutes her baby started to cough and it got so bad the poor baby could not stop coughing. It started to whoop and throw up with me sitting right next to her with my baby. Finally her baby stopped and I said to her, "Why didn't you tell me that your baby was sick. You know that cough that your baby has is very contagious," and with that I left and went home but nevertheless my poor baby started to cough that very same night. Sure enough he got the whooping cough and when he would take a fit of coughing his navel would swell up so much that one day it started to bleed.

I did not have any trouble like that with any of my other children so I called up my family doctor. He came right down and told me that the cough would last from three to nine months but if I had him injected, it would kill the worst part of it. So the doctor came down every week for nine weeks but his navel kept on swelling. He told me to tape it down with adhesive tape but when the baby would cough the tape would pull the skin off the baby's belly. I did not know what to do so one day an old lady came to see me and she told me what to do. She said, "Take two silver dollars and make a little pocket and put them in it and sew two strings on that pocket and push the navel down with your finger and put some cotton-batting on it and then tie that pocket with the silver dollars over it." That would keep the baby's navel down when he coughed. Well, in a short while he did get better, so you see, I still think old people know what to do about different things. They should not be put on the shelf in their old age like old

books, as they have learned something in the years they lived.

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## LANDLORD RUSE

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It was now 1940 and I had to move as I was living in a house that the city was going to take over. In fact they were going to tear the whole street down and they were building a project of all new homes. But that did not help my problems at all. I was looking for a house to rent but as soon as I told the landlords how many children I had, it was the same answer. Too many children. What was I supposed to do — drown half of my children in order to get a house to live in? So one day it happened a friend of mine was moving out nearby and that house was not too far from where I was living. So I went to see the landlord that owned the house and asked him if I could rent the flat that my friend was moving out. But the first thing he asked was how many children I had. So I knew in order to get the flat I had to lie about my children. Instead of nine children I told him I only had three and they were all grown up and working. That part of it was true, but I also had six more all of school age. I did not tell him about them.

When it was time for the landlord to come to collect the rent, one of the children would keep watching for him and as soon as they saw him coming they would all stay in the bedroom until he left. This went on for a few years and it was really fun the way we put it over on him.

After three or four years living there one day when he came in for his rent and I asked him if he was pleased the way I kept the place up. He said, "Oh yes, my house never looked so good," and I said, "Well, if I told you I have nine children would you believe it?" He said, "Never." "Well, I have and you are pleased with your flat are you not?" He said, "All I can say is I wish you all the luck in the world and God bless you and all your children," and I married all my children from the same house. I spent the happiest years of my life in that house.



Angela, her husband and family, 1945

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## GOOD TIMES

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I also have plenty of happy memories. When I was fifty years old all my children and my husband got together. It was so funny, they decided that I needed to rest for a few days so they shipped me off to my daughter. At that time she was living in South Boston and so I stayed with her for a few days. In the meantime the rest of the family was very busy taking care of the party they were going to have for me. When Sunday came I said to my daughter, "I should be going home today." She said, "Yes, Ma, I'll take you home at three o'clock this afternoon." When it was about half past two she said, "Ma, I will take you home now," and her husband said to her, "Do you mind if I come along?" and she said, "Why not." But when I was going up the stairs she said to me, "Ma, I think they are giving you a little surprise party so don't get scared when you walk in the house," because, God love her and bless her, she worried so much about me. When I walked in the



house to my surprise the house was full of people. All my friends and relatives were there. The house was full of people that I had not seen for years and that was the first big party that I had. I will never forget it. My girls were all dressed up and the house was all dressed as if a queen was coming home. Oh, I was so happy. I was crying and laughing at the same time. Everything was so beautiful I can just close my eyes and see it now even after so many years have passed by.

Oh, I have so many more happy memories. I will never forget my fifth daughter's sixteenth birthday. She had been asking me to get her a watch but the times were kinda tough then. I told her "Honey, I will try." I didn't think I would be able to get it for her but I put my thinking cap on one day and went to town and I got her a very nice watch. Of course I had to pay for it by the week, but I did manage to get it for her. So the night of her birthday, I gave her a little birthday party because no matter how bad things were, I never let one of my children's birthdays go by without giving them a party and inviting some of their friends. So the night of my daughter's birthday I decided to play a little trick on her. I had bought a box of chocolates and I took the wrapper off one of the big chocolates and wrapped her watch in it. I said to her, "Honey, I could not buy you the watch but I did buy you a nice big box of chocolates. I want you to take the big one in the middle and then you can pass them around," but when she opened the wrapper off it, thinking it was candy, to her surprise she found the beautiful watch. She tried it on and said to me, "Oh, Ma, there will never be another like you anywhere to think up something like this," and everybody that was in the house thought I played a very nice trick on her and we all had a very nice time.

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## HUSBAND DYING

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One Saturday morning in April, 1955 it was time for the rose bushes to be pruned and my husband, God love him, went out to do them. I didn't even notice him going out as I was busy fussing with my little granddaughter. About ten in the morning he came in the door

very pale. I looked at him and said, "Whatever happened to you?" He said he was trying to tie the rosebushes on the high trellis and could not reach them so he stepped on something and it slipped from under him and he fell on the railing of the porch, landing right on his chest. With what I heard, I thought maybe a drink would help him and as I had some brandy in the house, I gave him a big drink and he seemed to get his color back. I then thought it best to take him to the hospital for a checkup. The doctor took x-rays of his chest and said, "I found he has three or four broken ribs. As a rule, we send them right home, but in his case on account of his age, we would like to keep him a few days." This was Saturday, April 23, and I left him in the hospital. I explained that he would have to stay in the hospital a few days and that I would see him everyday. On Tuesday, I told my son-in-law and my foster son to go see him. They both went and no sooner had they gone when they came back and both said, "How come you didn't tell us that Pa was coming home." I said, "I was there this afternoon and the doctor did not mention anything about him coming home," but anyway, I got his clothes ready as fast as I could and said, "Here are his clothes. Hurry back with him!"

Now my sister-in-law and I, we were to meet in front of the hospital the following day and as she was living in Arlington, I called her up and told her the good news. I told her she did not have to meet me at the hospital tomorrow as my husband was coming home tonight. She was very happy for me and said she and my brother would come over right away.

The weather was quite cold, so I had the coffee on the stove and I pulled up a chair close to the stove so when my husband came in he could sit near the heat. Then my son-in-law and my foster son walked in but my husband was not with them. I asked, "What happened? Where is Pa?" but they both said, "Ma, please sit down." I said, "Will you please tell me where Pa is?" and neither one of them would answer me so I screamed at them and said, "He's not dead, is he?" and my son-in-law said, "Yes he is, Ma."

Now there was tremendous confusion and then my poor brother walked in the house and he heard everybody crying and talking. He could not understand what had happened in a few hours. What was all



the confusion. He asked what happened but no one would pay any attention to him so he had a pie in his hand and he banged it on the table saying in a very loud voice, "Will someone please tell me what happened in this house." One of my girls looked at him and said "My father was supposed to come home from the hospital tonight but instead he is dead." The bad news was more than I could take. I went completely out of my mind. Can anyone imagine waiting for someone to come home and having a house full of his children and relatives waiting to welcome him home, and getting the news that he is dead. My son-in-law explained that he was dressed to come home but when he took a few steps he got a pain in his chest and they sat him on the bed and called for the doctor. In less than five minutes he was dead.

Now in the meantime my oldest daughter's husband was in the hospital and she was living with me so she called up the hospital and asked if he could come home as he was now walking around. He went to the phone and asked her what was the matter, "Why do you want me to come home?" She said, "Pa is dead and I want you to come home if you can." Now she was waiting for him at the front door.

The poor man had understood her to say Ma is dead and when he met her at the door he said to her where is she and she said, "She's in the parlor." He said, "So soon?" When he walked in the parlor he saw me sitting there on the chair he almost went into shock. He thought he was seeing a ghost and got white as a sheet. He said, "I thought you said Ma was dead," and she answered him between the crying, "No, I said Pa was dead." I was now fifty-nine years old in the year 1955 with no husband. I would not believe he was gone, but I had to face the fact that I had lost him forever. On the other hand I thanked God I had him for forty-two years and with the help of God and all my children I was helped along in every way possible.

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## CRIME

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After my husband's death in 1955 I found it hard. My son and my husband had bought the house that we lived in and we split all the bills that had to be paid. It was now impossible for me to pay half of

the bills. So I turned the house over to my son, who lived upstairs. He said to me, "Ma, don't worry, you can give me as much as you can and I will take care of the rest."

For a while everything was going all right, but then he had a streak of bad luck and we lost the house. Then a friend of my sixth daughter bought the house and sold it back to the daughter that was living with me. She had a small son and she went to work and I stayed home and took care of her son. Everything went along pretty good for a while but when he grew up he was not too happy taking orders from grandma. Also living in that area was very bad. My house was broken into three times and I was cleaned out of almost everything I had. My daughter came up to see me almost every other day and she would take me for a ride or something and they must have watched the house. When I went out, that is the time they would break in. I lived on the first floor, and it was very easy because they would get in through the window.

It got so bad that I was afraid to live there any longer. One time when they got in the house my daughter-in-law was upstairs. She said she heard noises and thought it was my grandson with some of his friends. But the man across the street saw them taking my colored TV and he called up my son's house and asked, "Is your mother home, because I think something is going on downstairs and it doesn't look right to me." My son was lying down at the time so the first thing he did was to call the police. He did not want to go down in case they might have a gun and I don't blame him. By the time the police got there the thieves had a good head start and got away with everything. The worst part of it all was that we could not get insurance of any kind because there were too many houses broken into where we lived.

I decided we should get out of there so my daughter rented the house and we moved out. My son went to live in Dedham and my daughter and her son, who was now sixteen years old, went to live in South Boston and we broke up house and I came to live with my daughter number seven in Jamaica Plain. This happened in 1970 and I am still living here. I like it very much though some people say that they cannot or would not live with their children, I found out that you must bend as the wind blows to get along in this world.

# CHAPTER V

“NOT SO LONG AGO:  
Oral Histories of Older Bostonians”

## VILLAGE WAYS, COUNTRY WAYS



The Pedlars, circa 1900, Boston Public Library Print Department.

*“Lots of different groups lived in South Boston at that time (1910). The Irish of course, God love us. There were also Lithuanians, Polish and the Albanian group stand out. The Albanian women used to dress entirely in black. Black kerchiefs, black sweaters, black dresses, black shoes and stockin’s, some of them still do. And the husbands would get up at four o’clock in the morning and get their trucks ready, their little pushcarts. They’d go over to the market and fill ‘em up and be gone all day and at night the wives would be out waiting for their husbands. It was like something you’d see in a picture book. But it’s all gone, it’s all gone.”*

Frances Hirschy  
South Boston resident

There is a lot of nostalgia in this chapter. The past is seen in soft focus without the harshness that was often there. But this nostalgia also highlights an aspect of urban life that has gradually disappeared as people have moved to the more anonymous and affluent suburbs:

the village character of the old neighborhoods. In the urban village people knew their neighbors and shared with them similar values, outlooks and lifestyles. Frances called it “comaraderie,” — “I think there was something there about meeting your neighbors and talkin’ it over and helping each other that is lacking today.” Or as Kieran Flannery said, “There was more communication then. Today you don’t see the neighbors stop and chew the fat.” People even knew their neighborhood vendors and shopkeepers, a rarity nowadays. Frances recalls, “I remember Mr. Anastasias. He had his little cart until he was 101 years old. He’d come around yellin’ ‘Fresh vegetables,’ and Mr. Kelly, he’d holler ‘Mrs. Kane! Whattaya need today?’ ” Alice Dunlap, an eighty-four-year-old life long resident of South Boston (not included in this chapter) put it this way:

People were more sociable. They helped one another more. In my day, say you wanted something, why you always started at home by going upstairs to somebody. You’d say, “Well, I’m really short of tea,



or I'm short of this or that," and it was willingly given and you gave it back when you went to the store. You could be sick and soon somebody raps on your door and says, "Hello, how're you feeling today? Can I go up to the store and get you something?" It just seems that everybody pulled together.

We had colored families around us too, we had colored families on Fourth Street, and if my mother made a pie and if they made a loaf of cornbread they'd send my mother in a loaf and my mother gave them pies. And the kids were all in and out of my house just like I'd go in and out of their house. Nobody does that today. Today it's different altogether. Today it's money, money, money, it's grab all you can.

The descriptions are appealing, conveying what a loss it must be for someone who grew up in these neighborhoods to now live in an area where even the next door neighbors are unknown. As sociologist Herbert Gans remarks, when immigrants travelled across the ocean to America they went from rural towns to urban villages, encountering conditions that differed only in degree from what they left behind. For example, he notes how immigrants from Southern Italy left behind cheap, crowded living conditions in rural towns only to live five to a room in urban tenements, or how peasants worked long hours for rich landowners in Italy only to work equally long hours for factory owners in America. The similarity of conditions allowed people to transplant their village way of life to the new world without major changes in attitudes and customs.

Boston neighborhoods in 1900 were very likely to be ethnically homogeneous. This did not mean that all of say, South Boston, would be Irish, but often everyone on the block would be of one nationality or at least one group would predominate. The similarity of culture and values permitted more relaxed interactions between neighbors. People were not afraid to discipline the neighbor's children as there were accepted standards of behavior that the community observed and all adult figures were granted the authority to administer them. There was also a good deal of religious homogeneity. One woman mentioned that when she was growing up, "All the kids around me were Catholic. I thought Catholics were the only religion. That's all I knew." There

was likewise a rough equality in people's economic circumstances. Alice Cusick notes that her family and neighborhood were close because, "we were so poor what else could you do? That's why people were close. We had nothing and all around us had nothing."

The homogeneity of the urban villages offered a secure sense of self rooted in the shared culture of the community. But it was often a narrow culture, defensive and suspect of differences. There was little room for individual non-conformity. You got along by going along or you got out.

Within these communities, daily interactions were with people you knew. You met few strangers except when you went off to work or school. Relationships with the larger community were mediated through local figures usually known to you — the cop on the beat, the ward heeler or the parish minister or priest. There were few governmental agencies to intervene. Frances Hirschy notes that, "My mother was a midwife. Not that anyone gave her any liberty to do so but she was the neighborhood midwife. Today, her mother would have to be licensed in order to practice.

Sidney Bluhm's interview indicates the direction that events would later take. Sidney grew up in Boston's Jewish community, a community that was itself another urban village but which, like the Yankee-Protestant community, tended to emphasize education, hard work and individual achievement, qualities which would lead to assimilation into the larger culture. Parents wanted their children to succeed and simultaneously, to stay close to family and community. But succeeding in the dominant culture almost always meant cutting ties with the "village" that spawned you.

Boston's urban villages are now a shadow of their former selves, except in areas of new immigration. Where they remain viable, they are often seen as highly defensive and conservative, characterized by a "ferocious attachment to their neighborhood and a steadfast refusal to share it with outsiders of any nationality or color," as Richard Schmitt notes in his paper "Class, Class-culture and Ethnicity." He goes on to say: "A part of what is thought of as the racism of the white ethnics is their hostility against all outsiders. . . . What they are trying to preserve in late twentieth century, large and bureaucratic . . .



America is a nineteenth century, rural European culture revolving around personal contacts and acquaintance of the community members who have known each other all their lives." This poses a larger question for Bostonians and all urban dwellers: Can this type of personalized community be built on a more heterogeneous base — where individuals of different races, cultures and income levels live and work together without having to surrender their distinctness? The answer to this question will in large part determine the livability of our cities in the coming years.

**Frances Hirschy** is seventy-two years old and has been a lifelong resident of South Boston.



Frances Hirschy: photo by Jean Boughton.

My family life in South Boston was marvelous. My father was born in the North End of Boston after his mother had come from

Ireland. She died at the age of thirty during childbirth and left seven boys and three girls. Ten! My father was the eldest, he was twelve years old when he became the head of his family — his father had disappeared and he went out to sea to earn money to feed his brothers and sisters. My mother was working in Scollay Square in the nickelodeon. She had come from Ireland and was seventeen years of age when my father went by one day and he said he saw the most beautiful Indian princess. She was dressed like an Indian princess to attract the people to come in for five cents and see the show. That night he asked her for a date and seven weeks later, the both of 'em, my father bein' eighteen and my mother being seventeen, they married. They moved to South Boston right away and established a home at 193 West Fifth Street. Eventually my five brothers and my sister, seven of us, lived in the four rooms on the top floor. My father had been and still was at his death a longshoreman of Local 800. He made enough money and my mother, by managing, bought the little house next door at 195 West Fifth Street with ten rooms and a big yard where we were all raised. And it was *beautiful*! What a wonderful life I had when I look back now.

At the age of eight, my job was to wash down the stairs on Saturdays and go down with my father's lunch — he worked at the Commonwealth Pier, the Army Base, Castle Island, and when work was short they sent him over to Charlestown. The boats used to come in and I used to sit with my father on the dock while he ate his lunch. And I saw boats come in from all over the world! One stands out in my mind. It was a Hindu boat. The name I have forgotten but the circumstances are just as live today as they were — let me see now — sixty-seven years ago. I'm speaking of 1912, now. The Hindu people came over to the side of the boat and greeted all the longshoremen and then they started to sing and chant and run around the boat. They set a fire in the middle of the boat on a stone and, taking out a lamb, they cut it in the neck, letting the blood run on the stone, and one of the men started to make cakes. The smell was awful, but nevertheless, in about an hour they had their dinner. This was their religion and their customs and this was only one of the marvelous things that I saw at the waterfront in Boston from 1912 till about twelve years later when

I grew up and thought I was too old to go down to it with my dad's lunch.

My mother was a midwife. Not that anyone had given her any liberty to do so but she was the neighborhood midwife. She delivered many of the people that come up to me and say — well, like last week in the five-and-ten, this lady come up and said, "Hi, Frances." I said, "Who are you?" She says, "Sarah Gillan, your mother delivered me." I used to go 'round with my mother. I had a first aid kit and if there was any children in the family I would wash their face and get them ready to go to school. So between my mother and I, we were a team, and nobody gave us permission, we just did it!

I remember one time helping our neighbors. The man's name was Cyricnano and his wife's name was Franchetta. And was she beautiful! A bride of seventeen, all the way from Italy. They moved in at the corner of E and Fifth Street, and he was in the coal business and they stored coal there. We'd bring our bags and for 50 cents we'd get 100 pounds of coal to keep our home fires burning. Suddenly my mother came in one day and said, "Franchetta is going to have a baby." They came after my mother at two o'clock in the morning. She helped deliver the little baby and the woman couldn't speak any English so she threw her arms around my mother's neck and kissed her. The baby is now living somewhere in South Boston. She must be about sixty-five years old, but we're out of contact.

My mother delivered my child. Dr. M— was there but my mother done the delivering and he did the looking on. He drank. In fact he was pretty half-stiff at the time and my mother always used to say to my son, "Now don't you be too proud. The doctor at your birth was drunk." (Laughs.)

I don't care what anybody says, *those were the good ol' days* — there's something lacking today in the neighborhood spirit that was there all the time. You would know everybody's name. Today I'm living down on West Sixth Street for twenty-five years and I don't know my neighbor's name. When the policewoman came around on January the second to take the census the people had gone away and she said "What is their name and how many children?" I couldn't tell you. I don't know. There was closeness then that has really taken flight now.

I'm not sure why. The hurry-hurry of the world. I think those times were slower. There was something there about meeting your neighbors and talking it over and helping each other that is lacking today. It really is. There seemed to be a pioneer spirit then that is lacking now. Nowadays I wouldn't be allowed to go down and go on board those boats. The rules today are so tight, there are so many "isms" and rules that I couldn't step on board those boats like I did then. They would want your life history before you entered the area. I know. My son and I went down to eat in the No Name restaurant and the guard came right over — "Ya got business here?" We said, "We're going to the restaurant," otherwise he would've stopped us. See, there's more rules, there's more red tape today. This is true. How could a little girl of ten go down there and get on board one of those boats that have just landed. They wouldn't allow it.

When I went to the docks I would walk, or sometimes I took the streetcar. The streetcar was a nickel and it used to go from my place on Fifth Street to the North Station. Then you could get on another car and go to Charlestown. And a little girl could ride with safety. Today, I don't know. So I'd go to Charlestown with his little bucket and we used to eat lunch together. See, there's the comaraderie that I'm talking about. It's lacking today. The comaraderie was beautiful. And then my mother would say "How was your father?" I could give her the information that pa was working and would be coming home late tonight. We didn't need a phone. Then when you were down on the fish pier the men knew me and when I'd be coming by they'd say, "Frances, how's the chowder? Does your mother want any fish?" I'd have a newspaper and they'd throw some haddocks, as big as your arm. They'd throw 'em over and I'd bundle 'em up and take 'em home. Mother would then salt them down. She would buy the kosher salt on Blue Hill Ave., and after cleaning the fish she would salt and wrap them in autumn leaves and we had salt fish all winter.

There was a German baker whom I remember very fondly. He was a precious man, and every Saturday us kids from Fifth and surrounding territories would go into Mr. Kastenmeyer's and stand in line, because you know what happened? The *piece d' resistance* for that day was cat pies, at one cent each. *And were they ever delicious!* They



were a mixture of all kinds of pies that he had left over from the week. He mixed them in a great mixer and then he'd mix them by hand. It was blueberries, peaches, apples, lemon and pineapple. I think the cat pies measured about six by five. They were a meal in themselves and with a glass a milk — *tres bien!*

He had a huge oven and in the morning I would bring my mother's beans to be baked after she had soaked them the night before. She had also mixed her bread and put them in a pan. Us kids would lug it over and Mr. Kastenmeyer would cook the beans from seven in the morning until half past four at night and bake our bread for 20 cents. Then there was a little frankfurt place somewhere near the Commonwealth Pier, the name escapes me now after seventy-two years. But we'd get frankfurts for a nickel a pound. We'd call them cripples because when they're fried they'd get warts on them — but they were delicious. And with the cripple frankfurts an' the baked beans an' the bread an' the cat pies, I'm telling you, every Saturday night we had a feast!

In our neighborhood an iceman used to come around and a soap and grease man. He'd yell "Soap, grease!" and I'd run out with a dish of fat that my mother had already rendered, and I would get a hunk of brown soap as long as your arm. The waffle man also came around. He was a little Greek man and he had an oil lamp. He cooked the waffles for one penny and gave you a lot of powdered sugar on 'em, and yum-yum, I can still taste 'em, they were delicious.

Lots of different groups lived in South Boston at that time. The Irish of course, God love us. There were also Lithuanians, Polish and the Albanian group stand out. The Albanian women used to dress entirely in black. Black kerchiefs, black sweaters, black dresses, black shoes and stockings, some of them still do. And the husbands would get up at four o'clock in the morning and get their trucks ready, their little handcarts. They'd go over to the market and fill 'em up and be gone all day and at night the wives would be out waiting for their husbands. It was like something you'd see in a picture book. But it's all gone, it's all gone.

We had many peddlers around here. I remember Mr. Anastasias. He had his little cart until he was 101 years old. He'd come around yelling "Fresh vegetables," and Mr. Kelley, he'd holler "Mrs. Kane!

Whattaya need today?" They knew each other by name! And, ooh, that Mohican Market! I went up one day with a quarter and fetched dinner for the ten of us. I got a dozen corn, a pound of pork chops and a loaf of bread for 15 cents and a quart of milk for a dime.

I went to the Norcross School on D Street in South Boston, where the Condon Community School now stands. I left there in the ninth grade in 1922. I remember because I was class valedictorian and I wrote a little poem in the form of a letter. It started:

"Dear Teacher,

We have not always done

And said the things

We would like to do for you . . ."

The middle part was personal, about her teachings and how wonderful she was and then the end of it was:

"We never want you to forget

Your class of twenty-two."

I was the first in the class only because I had personal help at home from my father. In the classroom this meant I was in the first seat in the first row. You were placed according to your grades. The last person would be in the last seat. At gym time we had to wear bloomers. They were regulation and had about eight or nine yards of blue-serge material to them. They were worn with a white blouse and a blue sailor collar. Over that we wore a tie, but the bloomers were so heavy, I don't know today how we ever raised our knees with all that material. The shoes were high and were laced for gym but for Sundays my parents had bought me a special pair of shoes and a new pink and white dress. The shoes were patent leather on the bottom, with cloth uppers, and there were fifteen buttons. For my birthday I also got a buttonhook to button up my shoes and I was one of the proudest ladies in the whole vicinity.

Just one more thing I thought of — I'd get up at five o'clock in the morning to do my stairs. We all had an allotment of work and we done it because when Pa Kane would come home he would stand and say "Did you do the floors?" I'd say, "Yeah, Pa." Then he'd say, "All right, here's a nickel for Congress Hall." Boy, all the hours we spent at Congress Hall, thousands of 'em. I used to sit there and see all those pic-



tures — Burt Leitel, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks. For a nickel we'd stay all day until our mothers would come at five in the evening to get us home. Every time it would snow they would ring the bell down the fire station — no school. We couldn't make it to school, but we made it down to Congress Hall which was twice the distance.

The day I was fourteen, my sister and I went to work in a candy factory wrapping one cent nougat candy for the New England Confectionery. It was hard work for us but I remember one week I got eight dollars and I was tickled to death. From there I decided to go back and finish high school and then I went in the missionary service.

*How did you happen to get into missionary work?*

One summer day I was walking along with my young son in Scollay Square when I heard music. This was about thirty-five years ago. We were on Howard Street across from the Old Howard Burlesque Theatre and there was a group of people singing missionary songs. I was fascinated, so I went into this place called the Old Howard Rescue Mission. The man inside said "Just what we need. Would you help us feed this afternoon?" He was all alone. My son put on an apron, took the food around, and within one minute he was acclimated to the rescue mission. I stayed and read from the Bible, which I was a scholar of. Stayed all day. The Reverend Millett asked me to come Sunday and from then on I went to the rescue mission until he passed away. I then went down to the Dover Street Mission for thirty-one years.

The Old Howard Rescue Mission started in the 1920s. People from every walk of life came in — you had doctors, lawyers, people from as far away as Australia. Some came for the service but mostly they came for the food. We served a hot lunch — *free* — to anyone, regardless of race, creed or color. That's what I liked.

I helped cook the food, serve the food and I read from the Bible. Did everything. You had to be quite ingenious to serve there. I also passed out the tickets for the Pine Street beds at night. You'd have to see who really needed — the aged I let go first for the beds. Sometimes you'd have twenty beds and you'd have to really think "Who shall I give these tickets to?" — because it was a poor mission. We weren't

funded at all, just worked on the few dollars made from the tambourines. Every Friday we'd go into the barrooms with the Reverend and collect the money that God provided. The cupboard was never bare.

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## JULIAN BANOWSKI & KIERAN C. FLANNERY

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**Julian Banowski** was born and raised in South Boston and presently lives in West Roxbury.

**Kieran C. Flannery** is eighty-three years old. He grew up in Mission Hill and now lives in West Roxbury.

Both men were interviewed together at the Saint Steven's Senior Lunch Site in West Roxbury.

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*Julian:* My house was a cold water flat in a four-story tenement on Fourth Street in South Boston. There was no bath. 'Bout the only way you could get a bath, you'd have these big washtubs and you'd heat the water. First my mother would wash one of us and then another one — all in the same hot water. A single pipe ran up through the tenement and if anybody wanted water and somebody else was using it on a lower floor you'd tap on the pipe. That meant that somebody is waiting for water. That's how we got our water.

I'll say one thing, we always had our chores to do. I'd have to sweep my flight of stairs like from the second floor to the bottom. And my mother would have us sweep the sidewalk and even the gutters. And then you'd have these wood-burning stoves, remember? My brother, my cousin and I would all head down for Congress Street with our carts to the warehouse. We'd get wooden crates an' chop 'em up and bring 'em home. That was the way we kept the house warm. Either that or pick up coke down by D Street. On the weekend you'd get a load of coal and that's the only time you'd heat the house up.

We had these long johns. (Laughs.) I'll never forget, in the morning you got up and you'd be freezing. The first thing we'd do is run to

the kitchen to dress 'cause that was the warmest place in the house. For the bedrooms my mother used to make these big feather quilts. She would go down to where they slaughtered chickens, on Broadway and Albany Streets, and buy duck down or whatever it is. And boy you'd get under those and they were really warm. When Christmas came we had candles with clips on 'em. You'd put them on the Christmas tree. At night my father would light it and we'd all stand by with a bucket of water and wet towels in case the damn thing caught fire. As far as Santa Claus went, we had the old *Boston Post*. Every Christmas — it was religious — we'd write a letter in to Santa Claus, North Pole. The Post Office would always direct it to the old *Boston Post* paper. And then we'd all wait for *Post* Santa. When he'd come we'd yell "*Post* Santa!" and all the kids would come running down the stairway to pick up their Christmas packages. The *Post* would have a wagon loaded with these packages. We'd all gather around the wagon — "Is there anything for me?" The guys were always harassed by us kids but they'd yell our names out. If you're lucky enough you got a package consisting of a blackboard, maybe one of those gyroscopes, a few other little toys and a box of Christmas candy.

In those days in South Boston the forms of entertainment was going to the movies. Like we had Congress Hall, near C Street on Broadway an' we had the Olympia and about nineteen twenty-something they built the Broadway Theatre which was competition for the Olympia. On Saturday afternoon we'd all go up with our baloney sandwiches and wait in line for an hour to get in. All us kids would then pile in and we'd see a serial, a cowboy picture and a couple of comedies. It cost about 15 cents. The Olympia always had these old cowboy pictures — like Fred Thompson, Tom Mix, Hoot Gibson and each of us would have our favorite cowboy. In the evening sometimes my mother would take me to Congress Hall where they had amateur night on Saturdays. The contestants would win maybe a bag of groceries or something like that. Sometimes on our own we'd trek down Broadway over the Dover Street Bridge to see the old theatres on Washington Street — the Apollo, the Cob and the Columbia. The Cob and the Apollo didn't have any vaudeville, but the Columbia did. That's what



Boston Fish Pier, late 1920's. Boston Public Library Print Department.

we did, and of course, as kids we'd play Kick the Bar, an' Knock the Duck off the Rock. In Kick the Bar, you'd cut a bicycle tire about a foot long, and you'd either stand it upright or put it on a rock and kick it. It would be like a form of baseball except you'd have a piece of rubber hose instead of a baseball. We'd play games like that.

In the summertime people would congregate. Everybody on the



street knew each other and they'd all gather outside on a hot evening, sit on the stairs or on orange crates and talk about everything. The kids would play. Come the Fourth of July we'd go down to Boston Common and they'd have staging set up for Beauty and the Beast or Cinderella. After the display we'd come home and in those days, there were no restrictions on fireworks. You could buy as many as you wanted. Usually the fathers or mothers would buy the fireworks . . .

*Kieran* (interrupting): There was more communications then. Today you don't see the neighbors stop and chew the fat. They chew the fat now in supermarkets but nobody does it outside their house.

Julian told you about amateur night. Well, when we were kids the title "amateur" really meant something, see? He was the guy that didn't fight for money. You had amateur boxing, you had amateur vaudeville. And *those shows were respected*. Now in the present age you have amateur night but they're the Gong Show and they're just



The Saint Alphonse Gym, 1915.

ridiculing the performers. Whereas amateur night boxing, baseball, football, it was very, very good training for a kid.

*Julian*: Yeah, but they also had a hook. Remember the shepherd's hook that pulled the kid off the stage?

*Kieran*: Yeah, but that was the beginning of the end of amateur night.

There was a time it was treated with a great deal of respect but when they brought out the hook, well, what the hell, you were only ridiculing the performer.

*Julian*: That was part of the game in those days.

*Kieran*: Now wait a minute. Wait a minute. The greatest amount of respect you could show for a kid growing up, say if he was adept at baseball or football, was to say in speaking to him afterwards, to say he's a real pro. *That* was the big title once. And if he was super, he was a pro's pro. But the kids today have too strick a standard. They demand that the atheletes they watch should be perfect in every movement they make. But they're not participants themselves. Today they're just spectators. Fathers take their kids down to Schaefer Stadium and it costs 40 to 50 dollars for the day. In my day you went swimming or played horseshoes over L Street and if you ate too many



Lining up for the vaudville show, early 1900s. See also Rose Pitnof Weene, Chapter VIII.

hot dogs — which were only a nickel — you walked home. Maybe we didn't have any money or maybe the folks wouldn't give it but everybody seemed to pride themselves on doing something. Kids were participants. You had your amateur sports and you had little games like "Kick the Bar" that you played until twilight. There were swimming teams over the Cabot Gym and in Roxbury, the Saint Alphonse



Association fathered all kinds of athletic contests. Everybody participated in some form of sport. I rowed in the St. Alphonsus Boat Club for years and four guys I knew, for want a doing something, they formed a glee club, and the four became very good.

*Julian:* Another form of entertainment we had was packing a lunch an' going down to the Boston Common or to Franklin Park. We'd walk around the zoo and then sit down and eat and listen to a band concert. During the week on days off, we'd go diving off the piers off Broadway Bridge or Dover Street Bridge into Fort Point Channel. I'll never forget they used to have a shark scare every now and then and they'd have firemen out with the rowboats, one with a .22 rifle, looking for a shark in the channel.

Up by Commonwealth Pier — that's where we'd go fishing when we were kids. You'd pull 'em in one after the other. Soon, you'd have a school of 'em. Or at Kelley's Landing, there used to be a long pier going out. We'd get a burlap bag and rope and we'd go crabbing off the pier. The cops used to chase us off saying we'd dirty the pier or something, but we'd go crabbing there till a cop chased us away.

We made our own fun. Today, kids get all these fancy toys, but I don't think they have the fun. They look at the toys, they're surfeited with them, y' know? We'd go down to the dump and scrounge, probably come home with big picture frames of some Scottish castle or something like that but that was fun for us.

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**ALICE MULVANEY CUSICK** is seventy-four years old and has been a lifelong resident of Allston-Brighton.

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I'm seventy-four years old an' I was born on Lincoln Street in Allston, in 1904, not far from the old stockyards. Both my parents came from Ireland — my father from County Mead and my mother from County Mayo — an' we lived in a flat in an old house not far from the stockyards. Eight of us lived there: my parents, four brothers — who are now all dead — and my sister and I. My father worked for the Massachusetts Coal Company an' in those days coal came in bags. If



Alice Cusick: photo by Jean Boughton.

you wanted a 100 pound bag my father'd lug it upstairs or downstairs, wherever you wanted it. He was a big, strong, rugged man with beautiful white hair and red cheeks.

Our flat was right near Western Avenue and in back of the house there was a farm that had horses an' pigs. Next to our house there was a blacksmith shop and there weren't any cars around. Nobody had a car. If you had a horse an' a wagon you were doing well. Y' know how we used to buy our dishes? Used to be a horse an' wagon come along, that have a wagon full of dishes. An' that's the way you'd buy your dishes. An' you'd buy your clothes that way. Another man would come with fish on Fridays, 'cause all the Irish ate fish on Friday. We didn't walk to the store because there weren't any stores around. There was a bake shop way beyond the corner, an' when my mother had a few cents extra we used to have cream puffs but not very often. My mother used to bake everything, even bread. Nothing in packages!

Not too far from us, on the corner of North Beacon and Market Streets, there was a hotel, and when the men would come in to sell their cattle, they used to stop in there an' imbibe a few. Then they'd go down to the Abattoir — which was the name for the stockyards and slaughterhouses. The rendering day was Wednesday and oh, brother! The smell would go all throughout Allston.

We were a very close family, y' know, all for one another. 'Course, naturally, we were so poor, what else could you do? That's why people were close. We had nothing and all around us had nothing. My mother had to go out to wash an' iron because my father only made nine dollars a week. My mother had to go out to keep us together. She worked for rich people, usually at their home, but sometimes she took their laundry home. My brother would then have to deliver it to them on a sled.

My mother was very strict, my father was too. If you didn't mind, it was just too bad. Like if you get home from school with a bad mark, you'd get it from the teacher and you'd get it when you got home. I went to the Thomas Gardner Public School 'cause there was no parochial school around me. Then I went to and graduated from Brighton High School.

I might not of gone to high school, but when I graduated from grammar school I was only twelve an' I was too young to do anything. I couldn't go to work 'cause you had to be fourteen, so I went on to high school and took a secretarial course. After high school I went to work as a secretary, working at the Simplex Electric Company, starting in 1920.

I loved school. I loved 'rithmetic an' spelling but schools were strict then. *Believe me, they were.* You couldn't be late one minute, you'd be down in the front office. I went to Brighton High an' I got kicked out. Oh, I got back in again. (Laughs.) What happened was I got a couple a kids together an' I said, "Let's go in town." Every day before that I'd told my mother, "I need money for Red Cross, an' I need money for a penwiper. I need money for a pen." Well, my mother would give it to me, so after a while I had enough money to get in town. In those days the trolley was only five cents, an' the show only 10 or 15 cents. We went to the Orpheum Theatre — about sixty of us

all from Brighton High. So we're watching the picture an' having a heck of a time when all of a sudden all the lights go on an' the headmaster is there. He says, "All those people from Brighton High march out," an' he marched us from the Orpheum Theatre out to Brighton High School, marching along the street all the way out. Then I got a letter to bring home to my mother that I got kicked out of school. The next day it was raining and my mother had an umbrella an' whacked me all the way up from my house to the high school. That was in my last year of high school but I got back in. It was a good thing I did or she would of killed me.

They were very strict. Very strict. But I think it was a good thing — it really was. You'd have to salute the flag in the morning an' we had to go to church every morning during Lent — to seven o'clock Mass. You couldn't miss one day an' in those days we didn't have boots or overshoes. We had to walk through everything — snow an' rain — with just rubbers.

During Lent you had to give up something — like candy an' sweet stuffs — an' you had to go to church every day. We did the stations of the cross and we used to make missions. You'd get up at five o'clock in the morning to go to mission — no matter whether you're working or going to school or anything else, you got up an' went to Mass. I mean, we were brought up strict.

Father Mack and Father Calhat were our pastors in those day an' they'd go down the street an' they knew every darn kid on that street. If you were doing anything wrong it was just too bad, I'm telling you, *you'd get it* when you got in your house. They'd tell your parents! Oh yes! They chastised you. An' if I ever saw a policeman on the corner, I'd die I got so scared. I'd start shaking.

My family had enough to eat an' a place to sleep but we never had any money. If you ever had a nickel you were really rich. In fact, when they had football games at Harvard Stadium, my brothers an' I would run down there an' mix with all the rich people in fur coats. They used to give us a nickel or a dime, an' boy! we were rich. So, I mean, it was hard. We never even knew what a nice Christmas was 'cause my father used to like his little schnapps — y' know, the Irish with the beer. And every man that lived around us drank. The man upstairs



would drink an' get so mad he'd thrown the washing out the window, the wash tin an' all.

When Prohibition come in, my father stopped drinking but then he started to make his own beer. He used to buy hops in the store and he'd cut up potatoes an' put them in to make it stronger. One time he had a minister come in f'm a church on Harvard Avenue. I think how he met him was that he used to bring coal there and I guess the minister wanted to see what kind of a home we had. Well, father used to keep a case of beer underneath the kitchen table an' when the minister came our dog got on top of the damn bottles. Of course, the minister didn't know my father drank beer an', well, my father damn near died. The dog kept taking the beer bottles an' rattled them all over the place. My father nearly died. I shall never forget that. My father was *ashamed to death* knowing the minister knew he drank.

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**SIDNEY BLUHM** is sixty-seven years old. He was born in Roxbury, grew up in Dorchester and presently lives in West Roxbury.

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My parents came from Warsaw, Poland, but at that time Poland had been taken over by Russia and I think they considered themselves Russian. My father was a sheetmetal worker there and my mother worked in a little restaurant waiting on trade. He emigrated from Poland when he was being conscripted into the Russian Army. Jews were treated quite abominably there so he tried to get out of Russia as fast as he could. He came alone and about a year an' a half later he sent for my mother. She had one child at that time — my older brother Samuel — and then they had four other children here — myself and my three younger brothers, Michael, Joseph and Leo.

I went to Boston Latin School, then to Harvard College and I ended up with a Master's degree in education and in physics. My older brother graduated from Tufts Medical School and became a radiologist. Michael became an orthopedic surgeon. Joe works at what used to be called the Watertown Arsenal. He's one of their chiefs in ballistics testing and my youngest brother Leo graduated from North-

eastern and got a doctor's degree in organic chemistry. This was after he lost a leg and his hearing in the Second World War.

*What was there about your family that led to everyone working so hard?*

My father was a very industrious man and he had a lot of respect for education even though he wasn't educated himself. My mother claims that we all got our brains from her side of the family, in that her forebears were Talmudists. They studied the Talmud, copied the Torah, and were scholarly types.

As far as my brothers or myself are concerned, none of us were driven to study or forced to do homework by our parents. Each one of us did our work independently and it was as if each one of us had the drive to do what we wanted to do.

My father was a very good skylight maker and sheetmetal worker. He started working for other roofers and then he went into his own business as a roofer. He did pretty well in business, but he had some rough times. For example, my folks purchased a three-family home in Roxbury and subsequently sold that for another three-family house on Fabian Street in Mattapan. He really felt flush when he bought that house, but then along came the Depression and pretty soon nobody paid rent. He lost that house just about the time I was starting college. My father was willing to start us off, and in my case he told me I had \$100 he could stake me to but that was it. After that I was on my own.

Going through college at that time was really rough. I graduated from Latin School in '28 and when I went into Harvard I had my father's \$100 plus two or three hundred dollars that I had saved from working nights during high school. Harvard's tuition was then \$200 a year (it's now about \$6,000 with room and board) and I lived at home and commuted back and forth from Roxbury to Harvard Square. I just squeaked through the first year. The second year I had a full scholarship and that carried me through. The third year I lost the scholarship because I had to go to work part of the time and I just couldn't maintain the high quality grades I had at the beginning. I worked at the Boys' Club, at swimming pools, at various jobs, each one carrying a little bit more responsibility and a little more money. They'd go from 50



cents an hour up to 60 cents, then 75 cents an hour. I ended up being in charge of the bowling alleys at the Boys' Club in Roxbury. I made just about enough to get me halfway through the year at Harvard and I borrowed the rest from them in my third and fourth year. I ended up owing Harvard about \$600.

I had hoped to go on and get my Ph.D. in physics — this was 1932 — except that that year the bottom dropped out of everything. Instead of getting a fellowship at practically any school, all colleges everywhere withdrew their support. There were no scholarships and no fellowships available. It was then I heard that Boston Teachers College was offering a graduate course for a Masters of Education. I had to take a special exam to get in and I came out on top. When I got out I spent my time substituting in the Boston School Department. I did that for about three and a half years, then finally I got an appointment teaching in a junior high school (1937-38). After two and a half years I was appointed to a high school. I stayed on there and within about twelve years I was made head of the science department.

*Let's go back a bit. Harvard had a reputation of being an elite, W.A.S.P. school. How was it for a poor Jew?*

That's a good question to ask, because I had a son who went to Harvard, and his experience is altogether different from mine. When I went there, I went as an outsider. I commuted and wasn't part of the college atmosphere although I did participate in some of the athletics. My feeling was that I was a tiny little individual that nobody knew. I rode the subway, went to classes, went to the library, did my work, went to the lab, finished my work and went back home on the subway. As far as social contact was concerned I had practically none except for the boys that had come from Latin School with me and a few other Jewish fellows that I had met who likewise were products of public schools. Outside of them I had practically no contacts. People were all very considerate and understanding but nevertheless I always had the feeling that I was an outsider.

My father and mother were Orthodox Jews. Now, my mother was very, very devout an' my father was devout on holidays but outside of that he was sort of Jewish by custom without it having any significance to him. I wouldn't say he was Jewish by choice. Judaism was thrust upon him an' he just accepted it and he went to the synagogue on High Holidays an' that was all. He was a working man, he worked Saturdays, but my mother was very religious. She'd light Sabbath lights every Friday night and say Sabbath prayers. They insisted that we go to Hebrew School and tried to have us steeped in the Jewish tradition but as far as I was concerned I was busy going to school. My reaction to Hebrew School was simply this — the Hebrew teachers really didn't know anything about pedagogy. If you did something wrong they'd grab you by the ear and shake the life out of you. What they did was prepare us for going to the synagogue; when you went you had to keep up with the prayers. The prayers consisted of reading the prayer book in Hebrew and reading them very, very fast — so you could keep up with the congregation. So the only skill being taught was to read Hebrew without knowing what it meant. (Laughs.) We'd read as fast as we could an' they'd say, "Fine, fine. Wonderful. Wonderful," but it didn't mean a thing to us. Later we started learning a little Hebrew but by that time you were in no mood to learn Hebrew. So my objection was a logical one. I'd say, "I don't see any reason for this, I don't know what this is all about." It was being taught to us simply as a tool for worshipping as an Orthodox Jew in the Temple and it had relevance for that purpose. But for me, who's going to Latin School and had a lot of studying to do, I said, "Gee, I can't waste time doing this sort of thing." So I objected to going and I didn't continue going, and that was the attitude of all my brothers. As a matter of fact I didn't even reach the Bar Mitzvah stage. I just resisted it. I don't think my mother took it too well but they were very stoical about it, they just accepted it.

# CHAPTER VI

**"NOT SO LONG AGO:  
Oral Histories of Older Bostonians"**

## **RICH, POOR, BLACK, WHITE AND YELLOW**

*"If we learn about the different parts (of humanity) we are only learning about different parts of ourselves, whether the parts happen to be black, happen to be yellow or happen to be white. When we can get that through our skulls, then we might begin to think about the possibility of functioning in a way that we really are, that is, we're all of us one people."*

— Allen Crite, South End resident

This chapter looks at the experiences of various races and classes in Boston: a black, a Chinese, a poor white woman and a woman from a wealthy Brahmin background. All are residents of Boston, all elderly and all longtime Boston citizens, yet each knows a different Boston. For Helen Morton, private schools, a housemaid and chauffeur were daily fare; for Harry Dow running a wet-wash laundry kept food on the table; for Olympia DeStephano the burdens of raising children on welfare consumed her energies. She recalls, "Up until the age of six-



Interior shot of the Beebe House, Beacon Street, Boston, 1920s.  
The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.

teen I sing — I would sing beautiful songs." But later, "I never sing no more." Harry Dow was urged to "Americanize," to cast off his cultural heritage so he could fit in. For Allen Crite living in Boston meant a daily cultural assault on his dignity, "One of the things that people don't understand is this: that black people were faced with this continuous, unbroken bombardment that you have no history, no progress, no background or anything . . . That was very effective propaganda." Helen Morton's challenges were of a different sort. She refused to accept the easy life of a Boston Brahmin. Acting out of a long-standing family tradition of public service, she joined hands with those in other classes to build community in the South End.

These four people represent in part, the heterogeneity of city life. Yet city people often lead insular lives. In neighborhood bound Boston, friends and acquaintances are limited to those from similar social, racial and even religious backgrounds. Allen Crite notes how people who live in all white neighborhoods are "just as much imprisoned as

anybody in the so-called ghetto," imprisoned by their ignorance of the peoples about them. The people in this chapter refused to stay "imprisoned," and by sharing their lives with us they help us realize that, indeed, "we're all of us one people."

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**HELEN MORTON** is eighty-one years old and has been a longtime resident of the South End.

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Being two years older than the calendar date, my life covers all of this century to date! I was born (in 1898) and lived for twenty years in a very homogeneous middle-income, all-white suburban city (Newton). Of this fact about my immediate neighborhood, I was totally unaware. I was too occupied in living the very good life which was provided for me by my parents. I was born into a family which had a tradition of public service. My father was a judge of the Superior Court of Massachusetts, his father was Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and his father, in turn, was at one time Governor of the state. We were a two-children family, loved and cared for by parents who wanted the best of everything for us. And the best they gave us.

My childhood was spent in the horse and buggy days. In our stable were two horses — Roxy, the large one for the family use, and in succession, ponies for my use, equipped with year-round carriages and sleighs. There were no automobiles to prevent our pleasure in coasting down the steep hill on which we lived, by bicycle or by sleds. Our special pleasure in wintertime was the use of flexible flyer sleds, either attaching them to sleighs or standing on the runners of the sleighs, which we called "punging."

There was great excitement in the family when my uncle, who lived nearby, bought one of the earliest models of the Packard, which looked like a carriage. We climbed into it from the rear, and when we went at the excessive speed of 20 miles an hour, we attached our hats with large veils. It was not many years before the dirt roads were replaced by macadam, and the horse's hoofs made clacking noises, and cars chugged up the hill and began to speed downhill. I was spared the demise of our horses because I went away to college for four years. By

then two cars replaced the carriages and sleighs in the barn, and I was too grown-up to profit any more by the hayloft and the slide that amused us as children.

My mother was a very qualified housekeeper and homemaker. We were cared for by a cook of whom we stood in awe, a housemaid, a gardener and a chauffeur. Before leaving for college, I also had a governess, whose job was to look after me and help my mother with the sewing and running of the household. My father was a commuter to the law office or the courthouses where he worked, my brother was sent to Groton School, and I was a commuter to Brookline to the Windsor School. Instead of horses, I was driven by the family chauffeur until my last year, when I had my own car — a Hudson, which still looked something like a carriage and gave me a feeling of maximum independence and awareness of speed limits.

Not having any special idea about what to do with myself after college, I was attracted — possibly by the tradition of my family for public service — to get a Masters degree in Social Work, and it was by means of "field work" assigned by the School of Social Work that I was introduced to the South End of Boston, where I have set down my roots ever since — which would be since 1922.

The South End of Boston, sharply differentiated from South Boston, was and still is a port of entry for newcomers from overseas. Waves of immigrants have passed through, some moving out and others moving in. At first, before the beginning of the century, it had held promise as a neighborhood for the wealthy. Many years later, my brother, while clearing up some letters which my mother had written before her marriage, found a letter addressed to her in her maiden name at a house on West Brookline Street near Warren Avenue, the other end of the same street where I purchased my home in 1952. The house where she lived, and many others of the same bow-front red brick architectural style, were abandoned by the wealthier homeowners when they moved over into Back Bay, across the railroad tracks. The houses were then divided up into smaller units for rental to newcomers. The lodging house business flourished during the years when I first became acquainted with the South End. There was something very satisfying to me, to find myself in an area of many nationalities,



cultures, races and economic backgrounds. The training at Simmons College School of Social Work provided a variety of choices of professional work. My choice went to community organization, and the Neighborhood House approach of the Settlement Movement won my early allegiance. It represented everything I cared about. We worked with different languages, cultures and ethnic backgrounds, using the positive contribution of the arts — music, drama, visual arts — to draw the best out of people and break down the barriers between them, with residents experiencing “people power” through the neighborhood associations which divided the entire South End area into some sixteen or so self-running neighborhood groups.

How my immediate neighborhood has turned from a worm status into a butterfly is a story which has taken place thanks to the newest wave of newcomers from Puerto Rico. The neighborhood organization of which I was the secretary — the Blackstone Neighborhood Association — had a great deal to say about the arrival and beginning of the urban renewal period, which was to transform the whole South End. These were very animated years, when the combined neighborhood associations brought about a reversal in the plans submitted by the Boston Redevelopment Authority. I got a first taste of political activities by virtue of running for election on the citizens’ committee set up as part of the urban renewal plan. My own orientation has been from the first years of my time in the South End towards the diversified, low-income tenant groups rather than the property owners. It may seem odd that this could be so, when I was a property owner myself, but I felt better by having my house serve as a Parish House for my church (St. Stephen’s Episcopal) and very much better working for social change along with the “grass roots” citizens, who were mostly tenants.

Changes have come about not only in the South End, especially right around my house, but in the whole city. Outwardly it may look better, but as to the values cherished by Bostonians, it is more difficult to tell about the degree of improvement!

The racial situation has changed, but more in the places where injustice occurs than in the antagonisms themselves. In the 1920s, when a survey was made by some student YWCA workers, there was only

one church in the South End which would accept an ethnically mixed — black-white — congregation. It would have to be all one or all the other according to a few of the ministers. No colored woman was to be admitted to nurses’ training at City Hospital, and no colored medical student was to be allowed to work in the gynecological unit, which meant it would be impossible to get a doctor’s status. Brotherhood celebrations and marches for racial integration continued, but in the 1970s there seems to be more physical violence — throwing rocks through windows of black families who move into what had been all-white neighborhoods. Riots on the public beaches seem to have made the news headlines far more than the discriminatory practices of fifty years ago.

Physically speaking, I missed the beautiful opera house on Huntington Ave. The once landscaped Copley Square is now covered with cement. The former Mechanics Hall has given way to a beautifully landscaped Christian Science Park, but the flower shows have to wander to other places far less attractive. The skyline has changed with the Prudential and the John Hancock towering over my neighborhood, but with this change has come the invasion of wealthy householders buying up the former roominghouses and evicting the tenants, so that we have many more people lined up for low-income places to live than there are places available, either presently or in prospect. Will those of us who want to see the benefits of living in a heterogeneous, low- or moderate-income neighborhood be forced back into new homogeneous patterns such as those I grew up with and chose to abandon? The outward appearances may be handsome, but at the sacrifice of those values which stand for me as the best of America’s contribution to the world.

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ALLEN R. CRITE is sixty-nine years old, a prominent Boston artist and a lifelong resident of the South End.

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My father was born in Acton County over a century ago and my mother was born in Saint Peters, Pennsylvania, 1891. I believe they got married back around 1909 and I came around on the 20th of March, 1910. They tell me that when I was born there was a terrific



Allen Crite: photo by Jonathan Cooper.

storm so I suppose I could make a dramatic picture of that moment: “a howling storm, the winds raging, the trees bowing themselves down to the fury of the elements and amidst all the noise and clashes of thunder there was the wail of a little child and I came into the world.” (Laughs.)

I think one of the reasons my parents decided to come to Boston was there were some opportunities here and Dad was studying medicine. He had about two years at Cornell and one at the University of Vermont and it’s unclear to me exactly how that all worked out. At any rate, all of us came to Boston and Dad, for some reason or other, instead of pursuing his medical career went into engineering. He felt as though he had to earn a living and support a family and he did fairly well at that. He received a first class engineer’s license and for a black person to get that back in 1923, that took doing.

We lived around at different places. My earliest recollection is 41 Shawmut Avenue. The house still exists and it’s been recently rehabbed. I was there during World War I and across the street was an open lot. Somewhere around 1920 they built a municipal building there and

then the Blackstone School’s been attached to that. One of the units of the school has been named after me. Usually they wait until a person joins his ancestors before they name things after them but they took a chance on me. So now (laughing) I have to live a sort of circumspect life.

When I first started school we were living temporarily up at 689 Shawmut Avenue, that’s up in Roxbury and I was put in a school there. I was very young and because I was relatively taciturn one of the teachers thought I might be a little bit retarded. She wanted to put me in a speech class for special children. Fortunately I was transferred when we moved to 41 Shawmut and I went to the Bancroft and Rice schools. In the Rice school there was a Miss Brady and she discovered the fact that I had more than the usual ability in drawing. She suggested to my mother that I go down to the Children’s Art Center on 36 Rutland Street. It was a fine arts museum for children of the Museum of Fine Arts. At the Children’s Art Center we had trips to the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum. I remember making some drawings and one of my drawings was brought to the delighted attention of Mrs. Gardner—back in those days the old lady was still around. She invited my parents and I to tea, and my mother remembers us sitting down with this very old, rather sad but colorful woman.

In high school I got a scholarship to the Museum School and I was there about seven years, from 1929 to 1936. During that period I launched my career as a professional artist. This took place on Beacon Hill at an organization known as the Boston Society of Independent Artists — a kind of a take-off on the New York Society of Independent Artists. The Boston Society had these non-juried shows, and in one of the exhibitions I had a painting called “Settling the World’s Problems” which received recognition and was put in all the newspapers. A Mr. Cochran, who was art critic for the *Boston Transcript*, wrote about my painting and that was, you might say, my formal launching in the art world as a duly recognized artist.

During that period (about 1936) I worked in the Works Progress Administration in a government program sponsoring the arts. I was making easel painting documentaries on the life of black people showing life in the cities and so forth. I didn’t realize at the time I was painting history. A lot of the streets and the people I painted have just



simply vanished. You walk through parts of Roxbury and you think a bomb struck the place. There have been enormous changes.

*What was the black community like in the South End and Roxbury?*

Well, one thing you have to remember as far as the black community was concerned, it was much smaller in the '20s and '30s. It was also more diffused than today. In other words, there's been a gradual migration of the black community. In the very early days, back in the eighteenth century, Copp's Hill in the North End had quite a few black people. Prince Hall is buried there. And then, towards the end of the eighteenth century, the population moved to Beacon Hill. During the time of my childhood, that being around 1910 on, there was still a sizable portion of the black community on Beacon Hill, a growing community up in the Roxbury area and quite a few in the South End. There was then, during the 1920s and '30s, a migration from Beacon Hill up into the Roxbury area. With the Second World War there was an explosion in the size of the black community. You got an influx of people for jobs. The black population didn't grow as dramatically as New York's but it did grow. From around 40,000 for the whole state of Massachusetts back in the '20s to well over 100,000 in metropolitan Boston today. The South End during my time was quite a polyglot community. There was a colony of Armenians, East European Jews, people from the Cape Verde Islands, blacks, Scotch-Irish, a few Chinese an' so forth. The South End has been a heterogeneous area for quite a long period and it's still that way today.

My experience of living in the South End was very fortunate in this way. My friends and acquaintances were mixed. I didn't have a sense of isolation, of living in a completely black community. I lived in a more or less open community so I had the chance to look upon people's racial identity as just that, as how one describes somebody: "Oh yeah, he's about five foot four, male, black," and so forth.

*Did other people look on you in the same way?*

I suppose so, . . . uh, I can't say, but I look upon people just as people. When I was getting out of high school some friends of my mother's talked as though I should go to a school in the South because the thing

was — "Allen doesn't know he's colored" — whatever that means. I suppose that might be a basic commentary on the times. At any rate, I did find out that I was colored. I went down to Washington in 1929. And Washington in those days would make Selma, Alabama, look like a Sunday School picnic. I mean I ran into *official* segregation, and the experience to a nineteen-year-old boy was traumatic. It's difficult to describe the feeling I had. My relationship with all the white people I knew before I went down was about the same as before, since they weren't part of this experience. But thereafter, any white who wanted to convince me of his or her sincerity practically had to knock me over the head because I simply didn't believe it.

Fortunately for me, however, that was the time I went into the Museum School. There's a tradition amongst artists that people in the arts are less impressed — negatively or otherwise — by a person's racial or ethnic identity. They're more impressed with what he or she does. I don't say they are more idealistic than others but the general atmosphere seems to be that. And that was probably the best kind of atmosphere for me to go into for my "rehabilitation" — racially speaking. I went through a series of experiences which kind of helped turn me around so that I was able to see people as people and not in terms of their racial identity. I'm still out of step with some thinking because of my continuous living in mixed communities, but I've been able to avoid the feeling of imprisonment that blacks *and whites* feel. For example, people who live in the suburbs and want to maintain some monolithic monochrome out there are just as much imprisoned as anybody in — let's say — the so-called ghetto. And neither imprisonment is very good for either people.

That's one of the things I've been learning on a particular project I've been working on. For example, we think in terms of history, like history of the Egyptians or the history of the black people, etc. I'd like to get rid of that word "history" and substitute another word, "ourstory," because in the final analysis that's what it is. You only have one story of man, beginning with *Austropithecus* up to Viking II on Mars. If we learn about different parts we are only learning about different parts of ourselves, whether the parts happen to be black, happen to be yellow or happen to be white. When we get that through



our respective skulls then we might begin to think about the possibility of functioning in the way that we really are, that is, we're all of us one people. Then we won't have to worry so much about real estate and national boundaries and things like that.

*During the 1930s while you were working for the W.P.A., were you involved in the political currents of the times?*

No, I didn't take part in any political activities except I went and voted. But I was politically conscious in a way. At the time everybody was interested in what you might call "the Negro question," and what to do about "the Negro question." We had a few necktie parties and human barbeques in the South and there was continuous pressure to try to pass an anti-lynching bill. Of course, that was debated to death. The high point was the Scottsboro trial — I think that took place around 1931, something like that. Nine blacks were accused of raping a couple of white women. One of the white women — Ruby Bates — recanted and said the rape didn't take place, but that was discounted and all were sent to be executed by electrocution. When that happened it finally got to be a little too much. The people throughout the whole country — even though they had no great love for blacks — said "Gee, this is goin' a li'l too far, y'know." I think that may have been one of the turning points as far as the history of the black-white relations in the country is concerned.

My feeling at the time was that I wanted to do about two things, as far as black people were concerned. One was to make paintings and drawings of them as just ordinary human beings. Towards this end I began a series of neighborhood paintings of the '30s, just showing the life of ordinary people in Boston. That was item number one. Item number two — I developed a technique of black and white brush drawings which gave me the means to illustrate such things as the Negro spirituals. I started doing this in the 1930s. What I did then was to preserve some of the spirituals, showing them as hymns of the church in the same sense as any other hymn was a part of our religious heritage. I wanted to show the dignity of them and by doing that to show some of the dignity of black people. Lastly, I also did some other black

and white drawings using black on two levels. That is, when I used the drawings in illustrating an incident from the Bible I was telling the story of man through the use of a black figure. In that case, of course, the black figure went beyond racial parochialism. The other area was in using the black figure in a depiction of songs or anything else directly connected with the life of black people. I was just saying all the way through that we're dealing with human beings. Y'see, the thing that was bothering me — and it still bothers me today — is that we become tied up with causes but don't become involved with human beings. You speak about "the Negro question" — whatever in the world that is — and you sit down busy resolving the Negro question and you don't see the fact that you have a human being in front of you.

*What was happening in the black community in the 1930s?*

There was a great deal of activity in the black community. There used to be a Peabody Playhouse down in the old West End and we had quite a few other places up here in the South End. On the second floor of the Gainsborough Building there was a place called the Allied Arts Center. The center was somewhat similar in character to the Elma Lewis School, only on a much, much smaller scale. They fostered the arts and used to put on plays, more or less what you might call black classical plays. I mean you had a play such as *Dessalines*, which is the story of Haiti and the black rulers down there. Another group called the Boston Players put on a realistic type of drama. I remember one play called "A Dreamy Kid." It was a story about gangster life amongst blacks. There was something very rough about it, down to earth sort of, one of these *raw* kind of things. It caused quite a bit of cultural controversy between different schools of thought in the black community.

Then there were a lot of recitals. We had singing groups — people like the Walker Singers who sang spirituals to help raise funds for the black colleges in the South. And, of course, there were your little clubs, the sororities and fraternities. You had the Cantab Club in Cambridge which for about two or three years used to have these very fancy dances over at Symphony Hall. These were very fancy social affairs. We did have a sort of black Brahmins, which corresponded to the Blue Book kind of people, so there's a certain amount of stratifica-

tion there. This was before the inroads of those *outsiders*, all those who would come up from the South — dear! (Laughs.)

There was a certain amount of snobbery by the black Brahmins. It was the kind of snobbery you get anyplace else, like somebody who belongs to the Blue Book would probably have certain misgivings about somebody just off the boat from Italy, something like that. I wouldn't say it's peculiarly racial, it's just peculiarly parochial. There was some of that.

The churches were busy. One of the big things they used to have was a Negro History Week. People would parade the idea of their heritage, speaking about Ethiopia stretching forth its arms, et cetera. There was some knowledge of the black kingdoms but that kind of information was more or less the property of a few black scholars who weren't too widely read. And the kind of information that we today take for granted was conspicuous by its absence. To give you a case in point, around 1922 King Tutankhamen's tomb had been discovered by Lord Carnarvon. The newspapers were full of pictures speaking about this extraordinary find in the Valley of Kings. I remember one newspaper, I think it might have been the *Boston Post*, came out with an idea, almost headlines, of course, informing us that the Egyptians were not Negroes. Black people had been looking upon the Egyptians as being part of the black experience. I mean, if you look at the paintings of the Egyptians you might get an idea that they weren't exactly Anglo-Saxons. But at any rate, the paper and the article wanted to bring out this corrective so that black people would not get any funny ideas. The idea was then to inform the black person that he as a person had no history, no tradition, no anything. I remember looking at one of the history books on ancient peoples. The ancient people you would study would be the Greeks, the Romans and the Egyptians. All of these, of course, were white. Now, the Chinese and the Orient, they did have *kind of a civilization* but it was more or less irrelevant. And, anything south of the Sahara, forget it. That was the kind of thing I was looking at in 1926 at the Boston Latin School. But the effect upon a person like myself was to tell me that I had no history, I had no tradition, I had nothing. It was not too subtle but it was a very, very

effective kind of propaganda. One of the things that people don't understand is this: that the black people were faced with this continuous, unbroken bombardment that you have no history, no progress, no background or anything. Anything that you have is given to you by the white community. That was a very effective propaganda, especially in those days, but it's nonsense. Today, that type of propaganda isn't that effective because our area of knowledge has been improved.

The black community fought against this propaganda. You had this Negro History Week and things like that. A lot of the resistance was almost romantic in a way because it was more like an instinctive feeling rather than having solid scholarship. There were bits of solid scholarship around, like Harvey Woodson and W.E.B. DuBois, and some people got ahold of that but it was too hard to come by. At any rate, you did have your churches and they sponsored the arts, like music and poetry recitals and there was a great deal of that kind of stuff going on. The black community was pretty active and lively but all of that came to a screeching halt with the advent of World War II.

The war affected the black community like it affected the rest of the country. In Boston we got an influx of people coming in from other parts of the country. In the area of jobs — take, for example, the Boston shipyard. About 10 to 15 thousand people worked there during the height of the war. Now those 15,000 people had to come from someplace. They weren't all black but, I mean, I'm just looking at it as representative of what was happening. The black community exploded from about 40,000 to about 100,000 in metropolitan Boston alone. And so this community and the kind of cohesiveness that you find in a smaller community just simply disappeared. You had an entirely new kind of situation which we have today. Today we don't deal with the old families or anything like that. You might say the same thing is happening as far as the white community is concerned. The emphasis upon the Blue Book doesn't have the power that such a thing had in the olden days. I don't say it's good, bad or indifferent. It's just a fact of history.



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**OLYMPIA DE STEPHANO** is seventy years old. She was born in Italy and was a longtime resident of East Boston.

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I used to be a good singer when I was a teenager. In the old country I wasa the head one. Now when I come over here I started going to work and I don't sing no more. Up until the age of sixteen I sing — I would sing beautiful songs. I used to enjoy it in the old country, climbing up mountains with my friends to sing. Then I come over here and I meta this fellow, a nice fellow, about twenty years old. I was about twenty. Well, I meta this fellow and we started going out and my father don't like the idea because this man's own father tolda my father that his son was no good for me. I was too good for him because he don't like to work. He liked sports and getting dressed up, but I hadda work to support my kids. I hadda plenty hard life and then I wasn't interested in singing no more. I was interested in work and taking care of my three kids. See, I have spent all my life for my children. I lova my children. Later my husband took sick and died with a heart attack at the age of thirty-nine. I start a better life for me when he was gone. I take care of my kids and we get along wonderful, but I never sing no more. When I was younger, yes.

I had to go on welfare in the 1930s. We used to live on \$10 a week during the Depression times. The Depression in this country was very bad, very bad in this country. We had to stand in line to get the milk. We had to stand in line to get the food. We had to, there were no jobs. I had no job. My husband had no job. He made seven dollars a week shoeshining and we paid \$18 a month at that time for four rooms. So we went on welfare.

For welfare then my husband hafta work sweepin' the street. He was about twenty-five years old and he don't like the idea, he was ashamed to go sweepin' the streets. But he have to go otherwise they don't give me no support, they don't give me nothing. I remember one week my husband, he don't wanna go to work that week. It was Christmas week, but you hafta go in every day, puncha the card, you hafta work. They push you and they never give you anything if you don't go

to work. You don't go to work, you don't get paycheck. You know, I wasn't getting no money. Ten dollars I used to get! That's all. Ten dollars an' maybe we getta some milk. They give a card for milk and food. That's all. It was tough, no lika now, the people on welfare they get along good. They give furniture, they giva plenty money, they fix the house, with telephone an' everything. It is easy now with the welfare but at that time it was very tough, very tough. They used to come an' check you up in the house. A woman for the state usedta come in. If you have a friend in the house with you, givin' them a cup of coffee, they stopped payments, they don't give you nothin'.

After my husband died I got a job and went to work at General Electric. I worked from 1945 up till 1962. I wasa lucky to get a job in there because you hafta have a graduation diploma, but they give me a test for my hands and I was the best one. We used to maka Christmas tree lights — smalla ones. Then we used to maka the big one. We used to maka yellow, green, blue, red, white, all the colors to put on the Christmas tree. We hadda machine, big machine and very hot. We used to sweat because the glass hadda go through the flame. Was a very hard job but wasa good pay. I wasa makin' about \$100 a week. It'sa piecework, fast. Machine always run an' it hava little cups. It'll go round an' you full uppa does cups an' you hafta be fast.

I hadda good mind and I was a good worker. That's why I used to get a job. They never lay me off. They usedta let me stay, worka steady, 'cause I was a good worker. Then they had a little trouble through the union, see. The union come in and start runna too much the company, they hadda too much hand in the company an' so the company said to us, "We gonna close up." But they were smart. They moved to Tennessee and they also open up a place in Japan. The place close up in 1962.

I was fifty-three years old then, see, and out of a job. Well, I hafta keep working, I couldn't go ta pension at fifty-three. I collected unemployment for one year and went out looking for 'nother job and I find a job in South Boston. I usedta do tops for the automobile. Jesus, my God! I can't remember the name. It wasa right on Broadway. I quit there though. I worked there seven years but when I was the age of sixty-two I quit. I was tired. Couldn't take it no more. It was too mucha, the job. I was a very good worker there too but I took sick, see,



an' the doctor says, "You gotta quit that job. That job is too harda for you," he says. "You can't do no more." He says, "Retire." So I retire. I've been retired now for seven years and I getta Social Security. I getta little pension from G.E., 'bout \$26 an' 86 cents. \$26.86. That's all I get. If I make twenty years I woulda got \$100 a month, see, but I got only seventeen years so I miss out.

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**HARRY DOW** is seventy-five years old and has been a lifelong resident of the South End.

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Harry Dow: photo by Jean Boughton.

I was born in Worcester, Mass., seventy-five years ago and moved to Boston as an infant (1906). I've lived within this two block area of the South End ever since that time except for the time I was in government service and in the Army. My father died when I was twelve years old. He was a laundryman and he had a laundry on Brookline Street in the South End.

When he died, I had to take over from that time on. I had three sisters and two brothers younger than I — but since I was the oldest in the family it was traditional that I take over. I ran my father's wet-

wash laundry and I had a much older cousin help me. We ran the laundry until it practically fell apart and then built another one over on West Dedham Street. I took up the study of law and gave up that type of business as a result of getting involved in many of the problems of the building contracts for the laundry, and realizing that we were duped by the fine print in the contract. My brother — who was a few years younger than I — took over while I was going to law school and he kept it going until he died in 1942.

The South End during my childhood was a very nice neighborhood, well-kept, it had a lot of upper-middle class people living here. The Blackstone Park had an iron fence around it, the lawns were well-mowed and the whole area was very, very integrated with blacks and whites. We were practically the only Chinese family around here, except for the laundries that were here. The Chinese community in Boston was very small. A few hundred people at the most. And entirely male, very few families. We were one of the few families. Women were out of the question. The immigration laws prevented their entry. The Chinese exclusion laws still existed and prevented Chinese from coming in. [The Exclusion Act of 1883 barred Chinese from entering the country except for the wives and children of the laborers who were already settled here. Later, the Immigration Act of 1924 flatly denied citizenship to all "alien Orientals."] Matter of fact, there's never been a law on the statute books which discriminated against a particular race; you have no Japanese exclusion law, you have no Italian exclusion law; they're all governed by the same principle. But the Chinese were specifically targeted as a race and forbidden to come to the United States. Not until 1943, when China was an ally of the United States, did they abolish this law. The males that were here were Shanghaied over here by the people that wanted to build your railroads. It was a form of slavery. They had them build the railroads and do all the heavy work but after they finished the work the owners had no more use for them. So actually the Chinese have had it as hard as the blacks in the United States. They've really gone through the same stages.

*Did you say your becoming a lawyer was motivated by the duplicity in the contracts?*

No, I didn't say duplicity. If you say duplicity you might be in-

volved in libel and slander. (Laughs.) "Failure to understand the fine print of contracts." We spent much more money than we should. In fact we spent 10 or 15 thousand dollars for that little place, practically double what we intended. That amount is nothing today, but an enormous sum in those days.

Back in the 1920s you didn't have to have a college education to be admitted to law school. I was working in the laundry when I was going to high school. When I got into law school I still worked in the laundry part-time and I was also working in the Immigration Service. I was occupied three ways during the day and had very little time to do anything else. As I recall, I slept through law school. Completely! I don't remember going to law school (laughs), but when I graduated in 1929 I passed the bar exam on the first instance. It is my recollection that Alger Hiss, who was the top man in Harvard's graduating class that year, failed that exam. I'm proud of the fact that a good student from an unknown law school — Suffolk University — could pass the exam an' a Harvard man failed. I felt quite proud.

The year I graduated was the year the crash came and hundreds of people jumped out of buildings because they lost everything — *a very, very tough year*. The crash came in October. I was admitted to the bar in November and had a job with the Department of Justice with the Immigration Service. I wanted to quit and go into private practice but circumstances were so bad at the time that I just stayed on. As a result I stayed in government service until 1947.

I enlisted in the Army in 1942 (at age thirty-eight) because it was the right thing to do to go and save the world for democracy. Everybody in those days was proud to join but today nobody would. I was in the Army until 1947 and when I returned I immediately resigned from the Department of Justice and went into private practice. I spent about twelve years in private practice and retired. Except for community work, I haven't done any legal work for about twenty-odd years.

*You mentioned something that is quite noticeable — the change in values, for example, feeling a much greater sense of patriotism during that period of time.*

Yeah. You were taught patriotism in schools, and back in those days when you went to the public schools they'd try to eradicate any of

your ethnic identity, try to make you "American" and put you in the melting pot. But those facts don't hold true, I mean, if you're black you're black and you can't eradicate that. Today thoughts are along trying to preserve your roots an' all that sort of thing. My parents couldn't understand why I came home and refused to talk Chinese. I'd say, "Because I'm American."

*Well, you know, what you did, going home and not speaking Chinese. Italians did the same and . . .*

But they, Italians an' Germans an' people that are now Americans, they're identified as Americans because they're of the same skin color. But a black couldn't do it or a Chinese couldn't do it. We couldn't be accepted in general. There was always discrimination and possibly you were ostracized from social activities. You weren't invited to little parties an' dances! Today, it's the other way around. They make great efforts to recruit you but sometimes I think it's condescension too.

I remember when my sister and I first went to kindergarten. We sat through a couple of days and couldn't understand a thing because we didn't have any English-speaking ability. They sent us home and somebody found us roaming around the streets and took us back to our house. Our parents asked why we didn't stay in school and we said that we didn't understand them and so they told us to go home. Well, my father brought us back to school and we picked up English very easy. But after we picked up the language we were then taught not to be anything but "American."

I don't think that policy was any good. I think you should have the ability to talk your own native language and an understanding of other cultures. I think what we're doing today is much better than than they tried to do on me in the past.

When I was twelve and for a year or two after that I went to Chinese school in Chinatown, but I was never able to get a good Chinese education. There was too much conflict between the public school education and the Chinese education. I'd have to come back from public school, maybe have a snack and then run down to Chinatown — school ran from five until eight o'clock. They still have Chinese school in Chinatown but they can't accommodate all the peo-



ple that want to go. Back in my day they could handle all the kids because there were very few kids around. I am not able to read or write Chinese properly. I don't think I even speak it as well as I should.

*Was it rare for a person from the Chinese community to become a professional and a lawyer?*

Yes. The reason for that is that in the old days the people that were here had to struggle to keep food on the table and having no occupations outside of restaurants and laundries, they couldn't provide for a person to go to institutions of higher learning. As soon as a person acquired a working knowledge of English they would go out an' go to work. People rich enough to send their children to school sent them to professional schools such as engineering and medicine but even then, they often weren't able to practice their professions. I remember a fellow graduating from M.I.T. back in the late '20s who couldn't get a job anywhere. He had to work as a watchman for a gambling house in Chinatown.

I think I was one of the first Chinese in the United States to enter the legal profession. The reason that nobody ever went into it was that you had to be an American citizen to be admitted to the bar and in those days if you were from China you couldn't be naturalized — the Chinese exclusion act prevented it. If you came over here as a student to study you'd study something that would be useful. Nobody ever studied law because they couldn't use it in China and they couldn't use it here.

*How were American Chinese brought up religiously or ethically?*

Follow the Golden Rule. Do Good. Don't harm anybody. Chinese were very adaptable. Around Boston, Roman Catholics predominated. We ourselves were Congregationalists. Many religions have approached the Chinese — Buddhists, Taoists, some people call Confucianism a religion, but religion wasn't important among the Chinese. People believed in doing right — that's all.

We seemed to respect our parents more. You tried to follow the commands that your parents presented to you to follow. I remember when I was a young fellow I came home one day and my father had a

strap and gave me a real whipping. I asked him why I was being whipped — "I didn't do anything." He said, "I chased your brother trying to catch him and he didn't stop." My brother had run through a low passageway into an alley. When my father followed he hit and cut his head wide open. He said, "If you were a good example for your brother your brother would not have committed that little episode and I would not have cut my head." So that was the way — set the proper example.



Chinese religious ceremony, 1912. The Bostonian Society.

*How did you like working as a lawyer?*

It was all right. I didn't have any earth-shattering cases — ordinary run of the mill. Most of my cases were in immigration and naturalization. I haven't been doing very much for the last twenty years, except — like I said before — for community affairs. I organized the Boston Attorneys Urban Renewal Committee in Chinatown. The outgrowth



of that was the Tai Tung Village, a Chinese housing development. I helped form and drew up the papers for that. We were issued a charter by Kevin White who was then Secretary of State.

I got started in community work in the late '60s, when they had the riots and burnings in the South End. I thought "Jesus, we can't let this happen." Just before that Father Dwyer asked me to become a member of the SNAP Board of Directors (the South End Neighborhood Action Program). I said, "What are you, crazy? Why should I be involved? Why do you want me to join?" Well, basically he said that because the board was so predominantly black they wanted other people to be a part of it. I said no. Then after he pressed it again I said "Okay, if you want to nominate me, nominate me." I thought if he nominated me and they ran the election I'd get three votes and that would settle the problem. *Lo and behold*, they elected me! Well, I thought, I'll join and go through the motions.

Being on the Board of Directors of SNAP involves working on various committees. They put me on the housing committee and I soon became inspired by a woman board member. So, I worked on it and I'm still a member of that board — that's ten years now. From that was organized "The Safe Streets Program for the South End."

I was then elected to the South End Project Area Committee and I was on the special committee that wrote the housing report that's giving some of the people in the South End real headaches at the present time. The reason for that is because the report favors low- and moderate-income housing which the people who are trying to "gen-

trify" the South End are opposed to. They don't want any more subsidized housing in the South End or any more minorities. They want to beautify the South End for their own purposes.

Now I'll be willing to see them come in and establish themselves as homeowners, but I object very strongly to other people that come in and buy up lots at a time, renovate them and charge six or seven hundred dollars for new apartments now that the area is conducive to good living. That's the whole problem here. The South End has been revived but the people that want to profit from it don't want any more of the low-income people "coming in" as they say. *But they're not coming in, they're still here.* Low-income people are already here, on all of Tremont Street and some sidestreets. The preamble to the housing act says that urban renewal is to provide safe, sanitary and decent housing for low- and moderate-income people. Well, we should try to rebuild the area so that they can have a decent place to live.

I'm also a member of the Board of Directors of the South End Community Health Center. I am a member of the Emergency Tenants' Council Development, Inc., which is a subsidiary of Inquilinos Bonicuas En Accion, responsible for building the Villa Victorias housing project. And, oh yes, I'm one of the incorporators and sit on the Board of Directors of Casa Myrna which is an organization which provides haven and succor for battered women.

*How do you like being retired?*

To tell you the truth, I sometimes work harder now than I did when I was working for myself. But I like being involved.

## CHAPTER VII

“NOT SO LONG AGO:  
Oral Histories of Older Bostonians”

## CITY SKETCHES

*Small events tend to have the greatest claim to be remembered. Seldom do the very old deal in the epic. They specialize in flakes of colorful minutiae, as if they know that, when they are dead, it is not great deeds from their maturity that will recall their individual tones but the way they described a day on the river long ago.*

Ronald Blythe, “Growing To Be Old.”  
*The Atlantic Monthly*, July 1979.

This is a chapter of “colorful minutiae,” of events that etched themselves in people’s minds so that decades later they are still recalled with the same pain or anger or pleasure that marked the original event. Some of the stories are whimsical, some serious, and all of them very personal recollections. They represent for each storyteller an important aspect of life in Boston years ago. The speakers present some hard truths, truths that flesh out the meaning of the terms “Depression” or “orphan home,” giving them the sort of personal meaning they held for their participants. What is forfeited in



Women call for an end to Prohibition. Boston Public Library Print Department.

objectivity is recovered in the vividness of the descriptions. The chapter proceeds chronologically, from the time of World War I, through the 1920s and Prohibition, into the 1930s and the Great Depression, concluding with the Cocoanut Grove fire of 1942.

### THE COWS' REVENGE—Dorothy Campbell

In Allston before World War I, about twice a week herds of cows, two and three hundred at a time, would be driven up Brighton Avenue past my house. Eight or nine men would be there with long poles to keep the cows in place and I used to think that was a miserable thing to do because they were driving them up to the Abattoir to kill them. The Abattoir was where they slaughtered beef, near where North Beacon intersects Soldiers Field Road. It seemed a shame for those cows to take that long walk and to gain nothing from it.

My sister was terrified of animals and, seems as though she was always out when they passed by. Well, every time one of the cows would decide to chase her. She hated cows and I guess they knew it, so they would follow her right up onto the porch. I also had an older brother and he was quite a tease. My poor sister would rush up onto the porch, ring the bell to get in, and he wouldn't open the door. Oh, she was terrified! She couldn't understand why the cows picked on her an' I never saw them do it with another person.

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## THE ORPHAN HOME

Mary Pistorio is in her seventies and has been a longtime resident of the South End.

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*Mary and her two younger sisters are being introduced to their new guardians in an orphanage.*

One of the nuns in a big white hat looked at us and said, "Well, well. They're nice little girls but I don't like the looks of that one in the middle." And that was me. I had given her a dirty look because I was hostile, being away from my parents. But then they did something that I don't think they should have done. The next day instead of having us eat with all the rest of the children in the hall, they had us eat alone, the three of us. Why, I don't know. Then I said to myself, "This is a lousy dinner. There are no oranges." That seemed to bother me, there not being any oranges, and because we weren't being supervised—they didn't even take us in and introduce us to the other children—I decided I was going to walk out. I took my little sister that was five—the other one wouldn't come with us—and we walked right out the back gate because nobody was looking at us. This was the second day we were there. Well, in those days they had the open trolley cars and I must of had some money and knew my way home 'cause I remember getting off at Dover Street. So my poor mother, she puts us in the home on Saturday, and on Sunday there's a knock on the door. She opens the door and there's her two kids looking up to her.

My mother brought us back. She did that because she was going to the hospital for a serious operation. Well, when we got back I was

blacklisted the rest of the time I was there. They didn't consider that we shouldn't have been left alone in the first place, that we should have been with the other children. I never would have left had I been with the other children but because of this I was always being punished. For three years I could never go to the Wild West Shows or the circus. Finally I became a problem child because they didn't treat me right. Y' see there's something about you that you'll fight back if your parents aren't there to be with you.

I remember being punished one day where I had to get on my hands and knees and polish a damned hallway all day long. Another thing was they had a habit of ducking children—putting your head under a faucet or dumping a bucket of water over your head. Oh, I could go into detail but to make a long story short, they weren't too nice and for a long time I hated nuns.

*What did they do?*

Well, some terrible things happened to little children that used to wet their beds at night. Just before going to bed this nun, Sister Regina, would take those kids and put them over her lap and spank them—scared the living daylights out of them—then they'd go right to bed again and wet themselves and wet the damn bed. And the next night was the same routine—boom boom boom—the poor little kids would get spanked again. It was then that I said to myself, "If one of them lays a hand on me"—y' know?

One morning I was sitting on the floor getting dressed. I was only ten years old at this time and we used to have to get up at five o'clock, 'cause we had to make our bed and go to Mass every day. I was going to put my shoes on when this nun took them and whacked me on the head and said they weren't worth two pieces of hard crust. Well, from that point on I became very bold. I called the nun an old roughneck and then ran down and got in with the crowd so she couldn't grab me. But when I went downstairs to get washed, she was running the faucet and she was going to duck me. I knew enough to run up to the lavatory and, when the kids came by to go up to Mass, I mingled in with them and went to Mass. That was on a Thursday. That Friday—well, on Fridays we used to take baths downstairs. Everyone



would go down with their class and what you did was get undressed and then put on this little skirt—they were very modest—and wait for your turn. So Sister Eleanor—who was my schoolteacher— she must of been in cahoots with this other nun because she says “Wait a bit.” Well, I was trying to be a good girl that day on account of the day before. If I wasn’t trying I’d have flew the coop, see? Anyway, all the kids took their bath and Sister Eleanor says to me, “You sit there like a good girl.” So I’m sitting there then all of a sudden I see Sister Regina coming down the stairway and she had a kid with her and the kid had a big wooden bucket used for ducking. When I saw that I says to myself, “Aw, I’m in trouble.”

She came over to me while I’m still sitting there and she says, “What are doing over here, dear?” And all of the time I knew she was going to beat me. I said, Sister Eleanor told me to sit here so I’m sitting here.” “Well,” she says, “If you have anything to do go ahead and do it.” I said, “I have nothing to do.” She kept insisting if I had anything to do—meaning taking a bath—that I go ahead and do it. Finally I says, “Oh, what do you think I am, a greenhorn?” and I got up and strutted off. Oh, I was a bold little thing. So she says, “No, you’re not a greenhorn, you’re a guinea.” May I drop dead right here if she didn’t say that. I said again, “What do you think I am, a greenhorn?” and she says the same thing. Then she pulls out her damn ruler. I grabbed it and wouldn’t let go. We’re tuggin’ an’ pushin’ an’ tuggin’ but I was only ten years old and she was big. We came towards the little stove and there was a log there and she says to me, “If you don’t let go of this ruler I’m going to split your hand open with that.” And then I said to myself, “She’s bigger than I am and I might as well give in and do what she wants me to do.” I had no choice. I knew that I was licked, y’ know, and I didn’t want to get killed altogether.

I had to go get the tub, run water into the tub and get in the damn tub. In the meantime she had the kid go and fill the bucket ‘cause when I was in the tub she was going to pour it over me. Then she took me by the head of the hair and dunked me like a doughnut. I was screeching—I wouldn’t cry—and finally she let go of my hair and it was then that I fell. My head hit the tub and I started to cry when I saw that. When she went to pour the bucket of water on me I crouched

up and half the water spilled on her. She said to me she didn’t care, she was going to change anyhow, and then she took my poor shoes and stuck ‘em in the water. I was now waterlogged an’ soaked an’ bruised and I would’ve run away that night only my shoes were wet and I couldn’t get into them. I wasn’t supposed to go home for the Christmas holidays that year but they had to let me go home on account of my father making a big stink about it. Another thing, the nuns couldn’t stand it when I said I wasn’t a charity case. I’d always say, “I’m not charity. *My father pays for me!*” Finally at age twelve, I just took off and went back to live with my mother.

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## THE POLICE STRIKE

Julia Kiewicz and Tim Scannell

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*In 1919 the Boston Social Club, the local policemen’s organization, decided to affiliate with the American Federation of Labor and become a union. The Boston Police Commissioner, trying to stop this action, fired nineteen of the leaders of the Social Club. The police then voted 1,134 to 2 to strike and Boston’s Central Labor Council asked its members to vote approval of a general strike to support the police. City and state officials refused to bargain with the police and at the same time delayed in calling out the National Guard, letting minor disturbances and looting develop. By the second day of the strike public sentiment turned against the strikers and Governor Calvin Coolidge finally ordered in the Guard. All of the striking police were fired and for the next three months the National Guard patrolled the streets of Boston.*

*Julia K.:* My mother and I went to see what the crowds were doing during the police strike. There were great big crowds around store windows, breaking the windows, vandalizing, pulling everything out like clothing and everything. Nobody could do anything. People just took it in their own hands to do whatever they darn pleased because there was no police around. They just didn’t give a darn. Everything

was left at the mercy of the people and they really tore the place apart.

I was right there. Someone even whacked me one in the back. I don't know whether it was done maliciously or accidentally, but thank God my mother was in front of me 'cause I think if she would of got hit she'd of been knocked out. "Cause—ooh, what a bang—I thought I wasn't going to get my breath back for about five minutes. I got scared an' said "Ma, let's get out of here. Let's go home, this is too dangerous." So she says, "Yeah, we better." I was really amazed that she even took a chance to come out. But the crowds! I remember they were milling all over the place. Everywhere! They really took the town over. Then people went all over town. They passed our house and my mother kept saying, "Boy, hope they don't break our windows." We kept the lights out and thank God, they walked by. They were headed for town, over the Dover Street Bridge and they came home with suits and whatever they wanted to. They just broke all the windows and took whatever they wanted.

Two days later, after the National Guard was called out, a friend of ours was up on Broadway with a couple pairs of pants that he just got out of the cleaners. The National Guard was trying to make heads or tails with the big crowds and this fellow was standing in his own door on Broadway with the two pairs of pants. Then a Guardsman comes over and says "Drop those clothes. You stole 'em." The fellow says "I didn't. I got them out of the cleaners. I needed them." But the National Guardsman shot him. The bullet went right through him into the doorway, and we knew the man. That's a fact. We knew the fella and I even went up to see him when he was laid out in the casket.

*Tim S.:* I was only a kid, about nine, ten years old but I remember the police strike too. In Southie there wasn't much breaking in of stores and thieving but I remember there was a sugar strike on at the time. Some kids broke the windows and doors of the Mohican Market an' I seen the women come out with sugar. Sugar was very high and there was a bad shortage in them days. Then they had a dollar sale in a clothing store a few blocks away. They had dollar bills and silver dollars on the suits. Kids broke the windows and went for the silver

dollars and dollar bills. I don't think they touched the clothes. I guess they were men's suits. This was on Broadway between E and F, but most of the breaking and thieving was in town. I saw very few places where they broke windows in Southie. There wasn't much damage at all. Then the next day the National Guard came in—Coolidge was governor—and that strike was settled pretty fast.



National Guardsman patrolling during the Police Strike, 1919.  
Boston Public Library Print Department.



## “THE BOOTLEGGIN’ DAYS OF THE ROARIN’ TWENTIES”

**Tim Scannell** is a lifelong resident of South Boston.  
**Albert Vendetto** is a longtime resident of the South End.

*Tim S.:* I was born in 1908, under rough circumstances. Cold winters, zero degrees about three, four months of the year. When I was a kid you went out and picked coke or got some coal when the watchman wasn’t looking. If you didn’t get coal you’d probably go down the fish pier, come home with a few big-sized haddock. My mother would stuff ‘em and put ‘em in the oven, that’s what they call the Irish steak—better than any steak you ever ate. Them days were rough. My father died from the flu, left nine kids, the youngest six months old. It was in



Police dump confiscated booze—mid-1920s. The Boston Public Library Print Department.

the middle of December 1918. The flu epidemic. I remember people were dying by the thousands. My father died on account he had walking pneumonia. They opened up all the windows thinking that would help. Must of been zero degrees. He died in two days. They didn’t know what pneumonia was in those days.

So them days it was rough. Had to actually steal to live. We all had to get out and plug. I quit school at thirteen in ’21 and sold papers in the morning, sold papers at night and I worked a fruit stand that sold Belgian alky. And that’s the way of living in those days. Those were the bootleggin’ days of the Roarin’ Twenties, an’ everybody and their cousin had a kitchen barroom. I remember I was thirteen years old, mixing alky, selling it and putting it into bags with a little fruit at the fruit stand. “Let’s see,” (as if talking to a customer) “a dozen bananas and two half pints.” (Laughs.) You put it right inside the same bag. This man I worked with was never caught. He had a cousin working the stand and the top man of the raiding squad came in. I said to this Italian fellow, I said, “This is the police. The police!” He couldn’t understand English, but he loved that buck, y’ know. He wanted to get hold of a few extra bucks and thinking this guy wanted some alky, he went in and opened the slide to get the bottles—the hideways we called ‘em. Well, right away the police were on him.

The cop says to me, “How old are you?” I said, “Thirteen.” He gave me a boot in the behind out the door and says “And don’t come back.” I can still feel it today, the boot he gave me. But I was back the next day, bootleggin’ the same Belgian alky. The cousin went to court and he was back bootleggin’ the same day. So those were the days, the Roarin’ Twenties, *those were the days*.

*Albert V.:* During Prohibition, a lot of us made our own home brew. I used to make my brew in a butter tub using a can of dark malt, two pounds of sugar and a yeast cake. It would ferment for three or four days, then you’d put a half a teaspoonful of sugar in every bottle—we used to use empty bottles of ginger beer—and then fill the bottle with home brew and cap it. In those days you’d hear people say, “my home brew is better than yours. I use potatoes.” Someone else would say, “Mine’s much better. I use rice.” I’d say, “I don’t use potatoes or rice.



Just pure malt, sugar and yeast." Of course, you'd have to wait till the brew cleared before you could drink it. But then, y'know, a lot of times we didn't bother to wait until it was clear. We'd drink it just the same.

I also made my own anisette, my own whiskey and creme de menthe, which is a drink women like. You'd buy the extract of, oh, say, whiskey, at the drugstore and then you'd buy a gallon of alcohol from the bootleggers—\$10 a gallon. It was cheaper then than it is now. Then you would dilute it once because it was Belgian alcohol—pure stuff. When people came in, we would entertain that way and it was wonderful!

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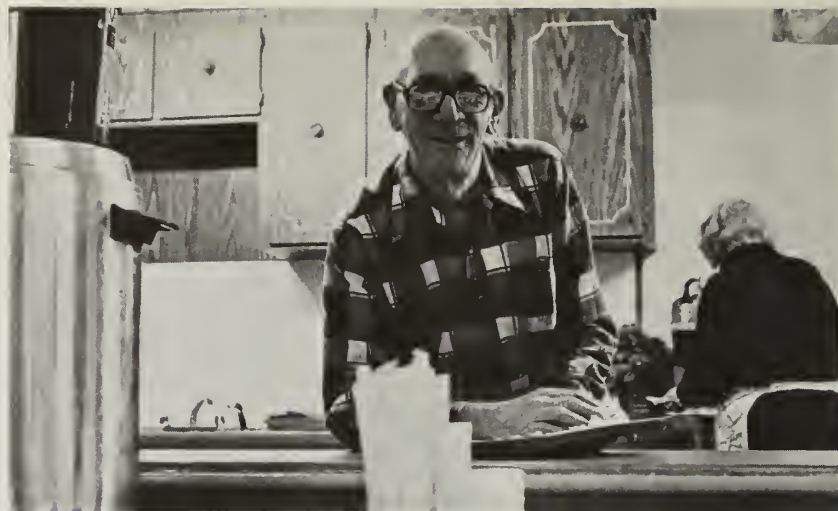
### COPS 'N' ROBBERS

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Ed McNeil was a teenager in the South End in the 1920s. In 1933 he moved to West Roxbury. Recently he moved to Avon, Mass.

I was born right in the heart of the city, on Atkins Street in the area they call the Cove, near where the cathedral is in the South End. My background is Irish an' Scotch. Quarter Scotch an' three-quarter Irish an' in the neighborhood we had everything—Irish, Swedes, Polish, colored, and 50 percent of the crowd was Jewish. We also had a lot of speakeasies in my neighborhood. For example, down on Washington, corner of Compton Street, there was this Thom McAn store. Next door there was this place called the Chateau, an' it was a regular speakeasy. Y'hadda knock on the door an' they hadda look, an' if they knew you, "Come in." You used to get three drinks for half a dollar, three gin rickeys and a dime for a glass of beer. For a quarter you got a shot an' a glass of beer. Good whiskey—top shelf—was a quarter. The Chateau was a nice place but they were paying off, y'know.

My friends and I used to steal booze f'm the bootleggers. There was this Jewish store on Compton Street and the woman was a widow with two boys and a girl. 'Tne kids all went to school of course, an' during the day she sold groceries and booze. Every now an' then we'd run



Ed McNeil at the St. Stevens' Hot Lunch Site, West Roxbury. Photo by Jean Boughton.

in tell her the cops were coming. She'd lock the door, take the booze up to the roof, hide it behind the chimneys, then go down an' open the store again. So while she's opening the store, we're stealing the booze. Then we sell it back to her. Sell her back her own booze!

Another blind was a cigar store. They'd hire a store, put two or three boxes of cigars in the window an' a couple cartons of cigarettes—y'know—Chesterfields, Camels, Perfections, Lucky Strikes—there were only four or five brands of cigarettes in those days—an' it was what we called a blind. An' that's how they sold the booze. They had a door about a foot thick so when the cops came, by the time they got through the door, the guys in the back got rid of the stuff. What we'd do is when they'd close at night, we'd break in and steal all the cigars an' cigarettes and if there was any booze we'd steal that too. An' they couldn't squawk, 'cause what they were doing was illegal, y'see.

But it's funny, these kids today, we weren't like them. We weren't destructive. We never broke things. We stole but we ate it or gave it to

somebody, y' know. As far as beating people up or robbing people, no. We'd go out Saturday night, 'course all the stores be busy, an' we'd steal an apple going by the fruit store because everything was put out on the sidewalk. Everybody went clipping apples, but we'd eat them. We'd go down the bakery an' it'd be busy as a devil. So we'd go in and steal cat pies. We'd have a penny to pay for them but we stole them just for the devilment of it. But to destroy things and hurt people, no. There was no shooting or killing, none of that stuff. If we saw a kid doing something wrong, small kids, why we would say, "Hey, cut it out," an' they'd cut it out. Even a strange man coming by, they'd respect him 'cause he was an older man. An' we were scared stiff of the cops. But, actually, they were are best friends. They didn't grab us for anything, they didn't arrest us neither. We'd get a boot in the pants 'cause they knew us all, they knew all the families. We had a local cop on the beat an' many a time I cursed him but today I bless him. He had a brogue you could cut with a knife. His name was Peter Norton an' he'd come down an' we'd be playing handball. Now that was supposed to be bad because you might break a window. But if we broke a window we bought a new one an' put it in. But he'd come down an' we'd be sitting around and the first thing you know he'd grab you by the ear an' while he's talking to you, he's twisting your ear and your head is bent back, an' he'd say, "Me name is Peter Norton, what's yours?" He knew my name. An' he knew my mother an' father 'cause a lot of times he took you by the ear and he took you right home. 'Course he'd be hurting me but as I say, today I bless the guy because he kept us out of trouble.

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### BIGOTRY

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**Dora Green** is seventy-one years old and presently lives in Brighton.

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I grew up in a mixed neighborhood of Jews and Gentiles in the South End and things are a lot different now than they were years ago. People are more broadminded today—a priest will go into a synagogue and a rabbi go into a church. Years ago you would never

hear of that happening. But I think it's beautiful. There should be no discrimination as far as race or religion is concerned.

In the South End there was an awful lot of discrimination and animosity. Animosity and bigotry. It was pathetic. Where we lived on Sharon Street there was quite a bit of it—undercurrents. I was pretty fortunate in that I never faced very much but my father wore a little beard and that word "sheeny" was called more than once. You don't ever hear that word anymore because I hope the world has changed as far as discrimination is concerned.

My father was a Hebrew teacher—not a rabbi. He would go to children's homes and teach them Hebrew till the child becomes thirteen and is Bar Mitzvahed. Bar Mitzvah means that the boy has grown up and become a man. Nowadays they don't have teachers going into homes like they used to. Today, the synagogues have schools and I don't think they did years ago. Children now go to a Sunday School and that's how a child becomes Bar Mitzvahed.

My father was quite religious. I haven't kept up the traditions that we had, but there are some that really keep it. I'm still proud of being a Jew, but as I got older in life I realized that some of their traditions aren't necessary. I've leaned away from them 'cause I think you lose a lot out of life if you believe in traditions the way they did. They separate their dishes, and whether I have no patience to do that or whether—well, it's like I know Christians that don't go to Confession. I think it's the same with nationality. I'd just like to be a proud American. That's what I'm proud of. And I wouldn't like anyone to hurt being an American. I just hope and pray we can have that in our elderly project—Jews and Gentiles getting along beautifully together.

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### "REACH FOR THE BOSTON POST"

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**Al Murphy** was born and brought up in Savin Hill, Dorchester and now lives in the South End.

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Nobody reads newspapers like people in Boston. I don't care, you go to Hartford, Connecticut, you go to any city where they got a



newspaper—if you asked “Where can I get a paper?” they’d say go to a hotel or go to the railroad station. But in Boston, they were everywhere: in front of Filene’s, in the streets in Dorchester, all over, the kids were yelling “*Globe, Post, American!*” Then there was the *Christian Science Monitor*, right here in Boston, probably one of the greatest newspapers in the world. All of these newspapers were in Boston. People in Boston read newspapers. That’s why I think this is the most educated city in the country. You could meet somebody on Dover street and they’d mention something and say, “I read it in the paper today.” You can’t say that about any other town. You go anyplace, they *don’t read* newspapers. That’s why Boston had those, how many did I say, those five papers in 1928. They had the *Journal-American*, they had the *Globe*, the *Traveller*, the *Monitor* and the leading paper was the *Boston Post*. And they all made money.

Now the *Post* was the “official” newspaper. Every birth, death an’ marriage at that time had to be recorded in a newspaper. You couldn’t get married unless it was listed. I guess that’s been done away with, but it was a pleasure to work as a lawyer for the *Post* because it had the coverage. We broke the Ponzi case and we had Eddie Dunn, probably the best newspaperman in the City of Boston. That’s why the *Post* was so highly regarded. It was the fourth leading morning newspaper in the country. It was the breakfast paper. You’d get up in the morning and the first thing you did was “reach for the *Boston Post*.”

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### DEPRESSION DAYS

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**Walter Napakowski** is sixty-six years old. He was born in Turner’s Falls, Mass., and moved to South Boston in 1925.

**Jack Spinney** is sixty-five years old. He was born in Lynn, Mass. and moved to Hyde Park in the 1930s.

**Bob Holmes** is a lifelong resident of South Boston and a retired postal worker.

**George Graney** is in his sixties and is a lifelong resident of South Boston.

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**Walter N.:** The Depression, boy, if it was in these days, the people would find out what it is to live, ‘cause we were lucky we got something to eat, ya’ know?

It was mostly bad in Hoover’s days, when Hoover was President. But when Roosevelt got in it was bad then but he got all the kids together had ‘em shipped to C.C.C. camps (Civilian Conservation Corps). That’s what Carter shoulda done to get these kids off the street—C.C.C. camps.

I joined the C.C.C. I was in the 139th Construction and my group was the first to leave Camp Devens. We put up barracks. Then after we built the barracks the C.C.C. kids would start moving in. We put up fourteen barracks and we kept moving. I was up in North Woodstock, Massachusetts; Berlin, New Hampshire; Augusta, Maine; we’d go to different sites and put up the barracks, put in the water, put in the electric. Then we’d move again, just like gypsies in trucks. It was very healthy and it was out of the city. We slept in tents—six kids in each tent—and it was very good. I enjoyed it but later I decided to leave. I left after they shipped us way up near the Canadian border. We were there part of the summer and then the winter started to come in. We got snowed in and they hadda send the food by airplane. They’d drop it to us by parachute. That was enough for me. I says, time for me to go back to Boston.

**Jack S.:** My stepfather told me if I didn’t get in at a certain time, he’d lock me out. Well, I got home late one night and he locked me out. It was wintertime and I had no place to go. For a couple of weeks I slept in the backs of cars. Then I remembered this kid that had a big tent. I pitched his tent in an alleyway up against a fence, in fact right where my worksite is located today. Then I went down to the bowling alley an’ I stole a couple of those rubber covers that they put over pool tables. Jeez, I used to sweat, the coldest winter night I’d be sweating in that tent. An’ I stayed there all through January, February an’ March. This was about 1930.

When I wasn’t working, I used to do little odd jobs for this Greek—Peter Chokis—who owned the Splendid Cafeteria. He was a good guy an’ he liked me and I liked him. If he was minus a





Jack Spinney driving a senior van. Photo by Jean Boughton.

dishwasher or som'n' I'd fill in for him. I'd say to Peter, "Gee, I got to eat tomorrow and I haven't got any money." and, y' know it was tough. Them days were tough to get money. Well, he'd put me on for the day.

So I remember he had a brand new Chrysler, Opera Coupe they called 'em in them days, that's like the cars today with the little windows in the back. Well, he used to park it in the driveway by his house. I used to walk down there late at night, crawl on my belly and let the air out of one of his tires. And then at seven o'clock in the morning I'd be standing in front of the restaurant an' he'd be walking up the street.

"Hi Peter." What's the matter, you didn't take the car today?"

"I got a flat tire," he says. "I got flat tires all the time, same tire."

"You want me to fix it?"

"Can you fix it?"

"Sure I'll fix it."

He'd say, "Well, you better take it to the gas station," an' sounding puzzled, "Jesus, you've had that tire fixed so many times now."

I'd take the wheel off, roll it over to the gas station, fill it up with air an' put it back on again. 'Cause I knew there was no nail so I'd pick up a rusty nail and say "Jesus, Peter, Look what I got out of the tire!"

So I'm eating off him for about a month doing this and then one day he comes down to the gas station with me. The mechanic says "This tire has never even been patched." Boy, Peter *gave me a look*. He knew, but he was a good guy, never complained. Then I remember he says "I'll tell ya what I'll do. Can ya paint?"

I says "I can do anything." Never painted before in my life. Well, he had a corrugated tin ceiling in the restaurant kitchen. It was rusting and they're tough to paint, y' know 'cause the paint don't go on smooth. Anyway, I says "Sure, I'll paint it for you."

Peter says "How much?"

"Ahh, just give me som'n' to eat once in a while," I says, "this will take no time at all." Took me three months. I'd go out and paint two or three squares, take the ladders down, come out, eat and leave.

"Survival of the fittest." That's what the Depression was. But I'll tell you the truth. I had more fun. I mean it was like a game for a kid, y' know, 'cause I'm figuring how am I going to get this, or that. But Jesus, I had a teenage life I think was out of this world.

*Bob H.:* I can remember the '30s. My mother had nine kids with no father—my father died in the 1920s. Welfare gave her \$12 a week and said "see ya later." That was it for welfare. You got \$12 whether you had two children or ten, and you fed them on it. However, if you weren't lazy you could work and get \$13.75 on the W.P.A. And that \$1.75 gave you six more meals. You could feed a family for a quarter. A pound and a half of spaghetti, a can of tomatoes an' a piece of cheese were a quarter. But in South Boston we also had the coastline. You could dig clams and catch fish. That saved us *many, many times*.

I used to shine shoes in all the taverns when I was seven years old. Knocker McCormack used to give me a nice bowl of soup or chowder.

Then I sold papers on L and Broadway in the middle of the winters with a pair of sneakers on and no gloves. I might make a quarter or 50 cents for the five or six hours I was there. I'd freeze to death but that money always come home to my mother. That was another meal or two.

We survived because we stole everything we could and we made it, yet everybody in my family turned out tremendous. I broke into three or four stores. Once I brought home half a cow. An' you'd go down to the fish pier an' steal your fish. My two brothers would go on the coast side and they'd have a mock fight and I'd be on the back side of the street. Everybody ran out to see the two boys fighting and I walked in an' picked the biggest fish an' walked out. That is how we existed in my family.

Actually, I think my mother knew about the stealing. We all did it, everybody. But, what the hell, when you look at eight kids an' they're crying, they're hungry—you had to live like that. It's the law of survival.

*Did you become active in politics during the 1930s what with all the hard times, unemployment, etc.?*

George G.: No. Politics, politicking, all seemed to be relegated to the scrap heap you might say. In those days people were interested in just one thing—survival and means of survival. You did a lot of scrounging, scrounging for fuel and scrounging for food. An' 'cause everybody's in the same boat, people seemed to be working together more. Anybody with a good job prob'ly found himself with his whole family plus. He was prob'ly taking on his father 'n' mother plus his own family an' prob'ly his brother 'n' sister. People just got under one roof an' did the best they could.

When we left high school in Depression times we didn't have too many options. We had the option of getting whatever job we could get and just doing the best you could with it. But careers an' anything else?—nobody knew what a career was in those days. Civil service was one of the few things that was looked upon as a career. The fellow with a city job was the guy on top. Firemen, policemen, schoolteacher,

any of the city jobs. They seemed to be the only people who were really working steady. If you got into one of them you wouldn't have to worry about the onslaughts of depressions.

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## A WORKIN' MAN

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**Martin Dillon** was born in Ireland and is presently a resident of South Boston. He is seventy-one.

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I came to this country in 1926 from Ireland. I was in quite a few strikes. And every time we went on strike, we didn't go for money. Unions started for security for the working man. They wanted to protect those that wasn't able to protect themselves—to improve conditions for the working man.

I got a sister up in Lawrence and I heard her talking about them days. They worked sixty hours a week, got paid by the month and you were living in their house.

*Company towns?*

Yeah. And stores. If you had money in your pockets you couldn't buy food with the money that's in your pocket. You had to go on the ledger. You'd be in debt. Then when you think you'll be all right—you'd have a dollar for yourself, everything was all paid up—you got laid off. No matter if you worked twenty or fifty or seventy years there, boo! out the door, they'd put you down deep in the hole again. Then you had to come begging. An' when a banker, a rich man put his finger up, the National Guard was out. You had no goddam chance.

I saw what was going on. Ask any of these people, they'll tell you the way it was. Then another thing, if there was a dangerous machine there, two people needed to run it, they'd break you down to one. One had to go in there an' got injured. When you worked overtime, you got straight time. If you worked nine hours, fifteen hours, you might drop

dead, who cares. An' another thing used to be going on—insurance. They insured you but if you got hurt, you got nothing. Fifty dollars if you lost a finger. If you went up to your wrist you got \$100. An' if you tried to sue them you were out the door.

*Were you a radical?*

No. But when you tell the truth you're considered a radical. If you speak up and try to help your fellow man you're a troublemaker. "He's a troublemaker—get rid of 'im." Then, next place you go, "You're a troublemaker." You keep moving an' you keep getting hell.

## II

The 10th of June, 1942, I was drafted into the Army an' I was asked, "Were you ever arrested?" (The Army usually refused people with police records.) I said yes. "Were you. ah, were you ever in court?" I said yes. Then they said, "All right. Sit down over there."

A soldier then came to me an' took me in to this colonel.

He asked, "Were you arrested?" I said yes.

"An', were you in court?"

I said yes.

"Were you in jail?" I said no. "Well," he said, "what were you arrested for?"

"Wait a minute," I said. "I was put on a year's probation an' I don't know myself. The cops just wanted to arrest so many people," I said, "so they could put it in the papers."

"But what was it?" he said.

"Labor trouble."

He turns to me and says, "Labor trouble? On a strike? For a union?" Then he smiles at me and says, "That's the way to be!" He shakes hands with me and says, "Well, you're in the Army now."

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## COCOANUT GROVE FIRE (November 28, 1942)

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George Graney was a Boston fire fighter for thirty-two years.

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The night company that I was attached to was one of the first companies to arrive at the fire. We found people running into the streets and heavy black smoke issuing from the building. By the time the companies aligned themselves and decided how to attack the fire, we were facing a wall of fire. Part of the Broadway side of the building just seemed to melt away. There was no explosion, it just seemed to disintegrate leaving nothing but a big ball of fire. I then moved my line down the Shawmut Street side of the building till I got to an open door. The door led to the hat check room but you couldn't go in any further than 10 feet because of the piled-up bodies. They stacked right up to my chest level, all very young people, and they were assumed to be dead. There was only one girl who seemed to be functioning. She was laying face up on her back and crying out "Please get me out of here. My father will be worrying about me." That's all she kept saying. I knelt and tried to get her out but I knew I would need help as it was almost impossible to move her between all the tangled limbs. Then, within a matter of seconds, a ball of fire came across the ceiling area. It temporarily drove me out and I said to the girl, "Hang on if you can because I'll be back."

I yelled and got more help and re-entered the area with another line to attack the fire. It was touch and go to get this one person out of there. When another line came in to assist we went to work an' got her. All of this took about two minutes, but a couple of minutes in a fire is terrible. Anybody who's ever had a fire experience will tell you, two minutes is an awful long time. But she lived. Out of probably 150 people, she was the only one alive. All the others in that area were dead. All of 'em.

We finally worked our way from the hat check room into the dance hall and there we found bodies just drooped over chairs, un-



touched by fire. Smudges under the nose and around the mouth area but the chairs weren't burnt. The bodies weren't burnt. They all just seemed to be suffocated. As we moved up to the stage we began to understand just what tremendous, tremendous heat there must of been. We came on the remains of bodies on the stage, bodies burnt completely beyond recognition, everything burnt off them. The only way you could tell man from woman was possibly by the size and weight. You'd see a thin, frail person—that must of been a woman. Or if you saw a husky frame going by, that must of been a man. That was the only means of identification. It was a harrowing experience to watch as they caged these bodies up and removed them.

By this time, one of the walls had been breached. Breaching is where you tear a hole in the wall using all kinds of picks and axes. You'd then pick up a body and pass it out through the wall to a truck.

And geez, what a sight. When I went out there the first time there were forty people laying on the ground. Forty! People were trying to revive them . . . I was working with one other fellow and we had no conception of the magnitude of the death toll. We got back to our station around 4 a.m. and started to guess—100, 200 deaths? By then, the newspapers started to hit the streets and the first figure I know we looked at was 200. Then it was 250, then it was 300, then the next thing we heard it was 400 and before it was all over there was almost 500 people dead. Altogether 490 people died, and that was the largest toll in this country's history, as far as building fires are concerned. I don't know what the figures are on the Great Chicago Fire. Many people were killed in that fire. But for a building fire, this magnitude was unheard of at the time. Four hundred and ninety people snuffed out.

# CHAPTER VIII

“NOT SO LONG AGO:  
Oral Histories of Older Bostonians”

## CURLEY AND CULTURE



President Roosevelt and James Michael Curley: Boston Public Library Print Department.

Boston has long prided itself on its cultural heritage and institutions, its fine symphony, theatres, museums and libraries. The Hub was the “Athens of America” and while its reputation has tarnished of late, the city traditionally encouraged support of and participation in the arts. “Official” Boston culture however, is largely accessible only to those with elite educations and incomes, a \$40 box seat at the opera or subscription to a theatre series. There is a wide gulf between this and a \$5 grandstand seat in Fenway Park or an afternoon’s jogging or evening’s television. Popular culture is accessible to millions and often, precisely because of this, it is held in low repute.

This chapter is concerned with popular culture in the 1920s and '30s, and with several people who made their living in the sports or entertainment worlds at that time. It is also concerned with Boston’s former mayor, James Michael Curley. It may seem incongruous to include a politician in this chapter, but in Curley’s case it is entirely appropriate.

Curley was very much a part of Boston’s popular culture in the

1920s and 30s, and politics then was as much a matter of drama and entertainment as it was a struggle over issues and power. Julian Banowski’s description of a political rally shows that Curley’s rallies were poor people’s theatre. There were entertainers, baseball stars, stirring speeches and torchlight parades. Aristotle said theatre was catharsis, and Curley provided this as he lambasted the Brahmins and tweaked the noses of the powerful. People could vent their anger and take up symbolic arms against their class enemies as they participated in a type of secularized camp meeting. For a few moments the have-nots had their revenge as their hero rhetorically slew the goliaths of Boston society.

1930s’ politics showed a deep sensitivity to class. There was a clear sense of “us” versus “them,” with the “them” being alternately the rich, the Brahmins, Herbert Hoover or the Republicans. George Moritz remarks how, “The bluebloods wouldn’t vote for ‘im (Curley). Only us poor people did.” Many people saw Curley as a thief, but they saw him dipping into the pockets of the wealthy to support the poor:

"We know he's a crook, he steals money, but he gives us some of it." There were limits to this type of politics. It encouraged largely passive participation, a falling in line behind your candidate without an active involvement in the formulation of policy. Thus, when a populist candidate won a position of power, no substantive programs resulted save where groups already existed to press for reform. In Boston there were no issue-organized constituencies to hold a local candidate to a program.

Sports, unlike politics, was something people became actively involved in, partly because, as George Johnson notes, there were not as many diversions thirty years ago. George Johnson, Jack Spinney and Rose Pitonof Weene were all professionally involved in sports: George Johnson managed local baseball teams; Jack Spinney was a boxing manager and trainer (in his interview he talks about how he recruited and trained Peter Fuller as a heavyweight boxer); Ruth Weene was a channel swimmer whose Boston Lighthouse swim in 1910 catapulted her to national fame, ending in a career in vaudeville.

Vaudeville was another form of popular culture, a form growing out of the culture of America's streets and ethnic communities. Elton "Woody" Woodward and Eddie Pearl are typical of many entertainers who made it in vaudeville. They started in local clubs, church halls and streetcorners. They practiced songs and dances before friends and then tried them out before larger audiences at amateur night performances, as Woody describes. This was the route that led into the major vaudeville theatres before they were undermined by the development of radio, movies and finally television.

Helen Holliday combined popular and high culture during her career, singing everything from operatic classics to the spirituals of her people. She managed to support herself through her singing most of her life, becoming quite well known around Boston in the 1920s. Mary Mandia is an example of how the cultural offerings of a city can affect and enlarge a person's life. Mary came from a working-class background, a background often portrayed as unreceptive to the arts. Yet she developed an appreciation of the world about her—the architecture of the city, its galleries, museums and churches. Her own personal qualities helped her put aside her shyness to become active in

the W.P.A. theatre projects of the 1930s. This led to her long association with community theatre and her singing for many years in church choirs. Boston's cultural tradition creates the climate within which people like Mary can develop their creative potential, but it is through the activism of people like her that Boston sustains itself as a cultural center.

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### "HIZ HONOR" JAMES MICHAEL CURLEY

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*The following people recall the former mayor and governor: Dorothy Boyd, Julian Banowski, Kieran Flannery, Ed Pearl, George Moritz and Tim Scannell.*

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#### I

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*Dorothy B.:* My first husband's mother came over here from Sweden when she was a young girl. She didn't know any English but she learned a few words and she put a 25-cent ad in the paper saying that she was available as a cook. I don't know how it happened, but she got to be a cook for Mayor Curley, catering all the political bashes that they had at the Curley residence. Well, she and her family became staunch Curley fans. Now when my husband-to-be was still living at home he developed a bellyache and he went down to City Hospital. There they said nothing was wrong with him but he got worse and worse. Finally his mother called up Mayor Curley and he tells her "You get him back to the hospital and I'll get my personal physician down there," and he did and my husband had a ruptured appendix. Curley's physician took the appendix out and so naturally my husband also became a Curley supporter and a staunch Democrat.

Now I came from a family of staunch Republicans and when I first met my husband in 1928 I had just started working in a company that was staunchly Republican. If you worked there you were Republican *or else*. Well, that was the year Herbert Hoover was running against Al Smith and the Republicans were going to have one of



these torchlight parades. If you wanted your job, you marched in the torchlight parade. There were no ifs, ands or buts. You could be a Democrat but that night you were a Republican. We all had to stay at work that night and they had our supper sent in. Then we all put hats on with bands around them and we had these stupid torchlights. So my husband, though he wasn't my husband then, stood around the sidelines jeering because he's a Democrat and I'm marching in this Republican parade.

All the years we were married he never changed his mind though once in a while he crossed party lines, but very rarely. He was always a staunch Curley fan. I remember one election he said "Let's not vote. You're going to vote one way and I'm going to vote the other way, so why don't we just stay home." I says, "Oh no you don't. Because when I'm not looking, you're going to go up there and vote! Why don't we just both go up." Now, I didn't always stick to party lines either but we just were brought up in two different sets of tea, and we stayed that way all our lives. He never gave and I never gave.

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## II

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*Julian B.*: Remember the rallies they used to have when Mayor Nichols or Curley was running for mayor? All the kids would join in and they'd give you a stick with a can on it. You'd light the can, like it was a kerosene lamp, and walk in a parade. They'd have a caravan a touring cars with signs on the back tires saying "Vote for Nichols for Mayor." Then on every big corner they'd stop, get out and start giving a speech about why he should become mayor of Boston. Many days during the Depression we'd go into these schools and listen to Mayor Curley. He'd stage political shows, with a few baseball players and there would always be somebody in the audience with a loaded question. It was all like a stage show. Curley would have plants in the audience and they'd get up and ask him a question that Curley knew people would be interested in hearing but nobody would ask. Sometimes they'd get a few singers—like a barbershop quartet would get up—and they'd sing before Curley would come on. As soon as he'd

come he'd have his flunkies running ahead, "Here he comes," they'd be yelling, "Get up, get up," an' waving ahead, "Up, up, up—here comes the mayor, the mayor of Boston!" Everybody'd get up and cheer whether they cared or not. We were kids, we'd get up and yell and that was a real show. That was another form of entertainment.

*Kieran F.*: Curley had one great gift. He would come in and survey the audience. Then he'd start off with two or three little generalities and finally, he'd launch into his speech, promising people exactly what they wanted to be promised. Right (Laughs.) He could capture an audience and was probably one of the greatest orators of all time. Curley got heckled one time but he pulled it off pretty good. He was getting on in his speech when this guy got up and said "How about Fire Chief So and So?" (Curley had just fired the fire chief) and Curley looked at the heckler and says, "Look, I did more for that man than I did for my own brother. And I had no more chance of making a gentleman outa him than I have at making a man outa you." Curley then starts moving down towards the guy and (laughs) the guy runs out.

*Julian B.*: Y'know he was very quick-witted. He was something like Churchill, in a way, because if somebody made a insulting remark to Churchill he always had a comeback. Curley was the same way.

*Kieran F.*: He was one of the most learned men of all times. As a matter of fact he spoke in the Harvard Commencement when he was the governor and it was considered one of the very best speeches of all times. I think the best judgment I ever heard about Curley was from a priest who said "There must be a God because only God can judge a man like Curley." People divided over Curley three ways. Some said "Oh, James Michael Curley was a thief but he robbed from the rich and gave to the poor." Others said "James Michael Curley was a thief; he robbed from the rich," and some just said, "James Michael Curley was a thief." That's the way people thought. You always had a faction that was with Curley and against Curley.

*Julian B.*: Yeah. There was no choice. You were with him or against him, one or the other.

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### III

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*Ed P.:* The last time James Michael Curley came in to file his papers for mayor, he had just been released from custody down in Danbury, Connecticut, for mail fraud. He came up to the counter and said, "Hello, Ed, you're still here?" I said, "I'll be for a good many years, Jim." We would talk that way, y' know. He says, "Well, I'm assumin' candidacy again for the mayor of Boston." "A'right," I says, "As you know, Jim, you can only put three titles on a nomination paper." He says, "Well, put me down as former mayor, former governor, and former guest of United States government."

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### IV

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*George M.:* When I was around seventeen years old Curley used to get up on a wooden box in Roslindale Square. He was stumping for Congressman then. We'd listen to him and that man could talk you deaf an' dumb. He was the greatest orator Boston ever had, smart as a whistle. Curley got out a big vote, everybody voted for him, y' know, the run of the mill voted for him, poor people, 'cause he done so much for poor people. All the municipal buildings that you have all over Boston he got for us. He put 'em through.

He was a crook, arrested twice y' know, in jail for using the mails to defraud or something, but he weathered that an' people still voted for him. But jail almost killed him. Got too old an' he had to retire.

People used to say "Jim, we know he's a crook he steals money, but he gives us some of it. That's all we care about." See, he'd steal \$50,000 and throw \$1,000 to us. An' we liked him, we were tickled to death to get a few crumbs. Let him steal all he can get away with, that's his problem. Long as he gives us something back, so we always voted for him. First we put him in Congress and then he run for Mayor. I think he made Governor once an' then got beat. He couldn't stay governor because that was too high a job. With a jail record, everybody held that against him. The bluebloods wouldn't vote for him. Only us poor people did. But Jim Curley was one hell of a guy, I

don't care who you interview, they'll tell ya exactly what I say. Everybody liked him. He got us these municipal buildings, and put a swimming pool in every one. He did a lot for poor people that didn't have nothin'.

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### V

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*Tim S.:* The best president we had an' this country will ever have was Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt closed all the banks and reorganized 'em and saved the country when it was ready to collapse. He's the man that saved this country and it should never be forgotten. He's the one that put in all these good benefits we're having even today. Unemployment. Social Security. It was Roosevelt. If we didn't have Roosevelt I think the country would of *crashed!* It was ready to crash until he saved the country. And, as I say, the benefits we're having right here today we can thank Roosevelt for 'em. No Republican would dare to even think of 'em. So I'd say the Democratic Party is the best party. It always will be the best party. It's for the people, the workin' man, and all classes.

And we had a great man in James Michael Curley — who I happened to drive for and was involved with for eight years. He went against Al Smith, campaigned all over the United States for Franklin D. Roosevelt, went against one of his own kind because he thought Roosevelt was the best man. And he was. I think Curley was one of the greatest mayors Boston ever had or ever will have — for *our* people, for the workin' man. That man gave everything he made. He died broke. Franklin D. Roosevelt and James Michael Curley. They were two of the greatest men we ever had.

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**Jack Spinney** is sixty-five years old. He was born in Lynn, Mass., and has lived in Hyde Park since the 1930s. He is a former boxing manager and trainer.

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I was standing on a corner talking to a guy when I saw this kid riding a bicycle down the street. He had one of his pants legs rulled up



to his calf and had a T-shirt on. "Jesus," I says, "there's a kid! Look at the body on him. Big wide shoulders, big arms, big legs, big calfs." I was looking around for fighters then 'cause I was managing 'em. There was a cab on the corner, so I get in and tell the driver, "Chase that kid on the bicycle." He's on one of those three-speeders and by that time he was down around Copley Square. We caught him before he got into Park Square. I hollered to the cabbie to stop, I get out and the kid comes over to me. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"You sure can," he says, "I know you." I started to laugh because I didn't know him at all. "How do you know me?"

"You had a hell of a heavyweight fighter," he says. "You used to train him down in New Garden gym. I used to go down there all the time. Jesus, that guy could fight!"

"Well," I says, "I developed him, and I'd like to develop you. Are you interested in being a fighter?"

"Oh, I'd love to learn how to fight."

"Well, come down to the gym tomorrow and bring your muscles with ya."

(The kid, who is Peter Fuller, was son of former governor Alvin T. Fuller, and later the owner of Boston's largest Cadillac-Oldsmobile dealership. He tells Jack his name is Peter Bond and after several months of training Jack arranges for Peter's first fight.)

About three days before the fight, Peter comes into the gym with a long look on his face. I says "Well, in three days you're fighting in Brockton. Keep doing your roadwork but I'm not gonna letcha box too much in the gym now, you rest up." I was afraid he might get cut or som'n'.

"I gotta talk to ya," that's the way he put it, "Jackie, I gotta talk to ya, 'cause. . . ."

Yes, it's very important."

"Aw," I says, "Your mother don't wantcha ta fight. Your girl don't wantcha ta fight."

He starts to laugh. "No, nothing like that, Jackie, but I gotta talk to you alone."

"Why, whattaya want?"

"My name isn't Peter Bond."



Jack Spinney (left) and partner preparing Peter Fuller for boxing match.  
Boston Public Library Print Department.

"Well, do ya wanna fight under the name of Peter Bond? If you wanna I'll fix that." I could do anything and what the hell, the promoters didn't care.

"Oh no, you don't understand, Jackie," he says, "My name is Peter Fuller."

We had a kid in the gym from the North End, went by the name Sammy Fuller but his real name was Sambino Fiuriello. So I said to Peter, "Are you any relation to Sammy Fuller from the North End?"

Peter starts to laugh 'cause he's class, y' know, blueblood like.

"You mean Sambino Fiuriello?"

"How'd you know his name?"

"Well, I know all about him, he was a good fighter."

"He sure was. But you're no relation?"



He says, "No. I'm Peter Fuller."

"Well," I says, "Where's the connection? You tell me I don't understand that your name isn't Peter Bond, now it's Peter Fuller. Do you wanna fight or don'tcha wanna fight? And do ya wanna use that name?"

"Jackie, you don't understand. My dad was ex-governor Alvin T. Fuller."

"Jesus Christ!" I run to the phone an' call the Brockton promoter. "Gene," I says, "Who'dya think this new heavyweight is that I got? He's the son of former governor Alvin T. Fuller."

"Jackie, you're kiddin'. A multi-millionaire?"

I says, "Yep. That's who he is."

"Jackie, can he fight?"

"He can fight like hell, he's a tough kid, strong as an ox."

"Can I use his name in the publicity?"

"Use it!"

Friday night we went down to Brockton. The firemen came in an' chased half the people out of the building they were so packed in. Gene comes up to me an' says "I got bad news for you, Jack. The only one that would fight this kid is this year's New England heavyweight champ."

"Jesus Christ, is that the only guy you could get? Why didn't you get his grandmother or something? You couldn't dig somebody up?"

Earlier I had told him I wanted somebody who's going to stand and give him a fight. I didn't want no soft touch but I didn't want no champions in there with him either, at least not till he gets his feet wet.

"Jackie, he's the only one that would fight him."

So I says, "Well, we'll find out if this kid's got anything in him tonight."

I went in and told the kid. I says, "Pete, you're fighting the New England heavyweight champ — Peter Boyd."

"Oh, I've seen him fight."

"Can ya lick him?"

"Well, he's a tough guy but I'll lick him."

I'd seen him fight too and I said "He don't throw many left jabs

but you've got a fair left jab, and the guy's kinda meaty" — not much of a stomach — "Hit him with that uppercut. Slip under his left hand, hit him with that right hand uppercut in the belly. Lift it. Lift it up. Hit him a hook in the chin. An' keep your left hand out there."

I bandaged his hands an' gloved him up. "How'dya feel?"

"Jackie, I'm nervous."

I says, "That's good."

"Whatd'ya mean it's good?"

"That's your animal instinct. The minute that bell rings that leaves ya. Everybody gets that." I asked, "Ya ever play football?"

He says "Yeah."

"Didja ever get butterflies in your stomach before the kickoff?"

"Yeah."

"What happened when the whistle blew an' they kicked the ball?"

"It went away."

"The same thing happens here when the bell rings."

"Does it really?"

"Yeah. If ya wasn't nervous, Peter, you wouldn't be worth anything. That's your animal instinct inside ya. Everybody's got it."

Well, he went in there and *won every minute of every round!* Didn't knock the guy out, but he had the guy all busted up, his mouth was bleeding, his nose was bleeding, an' the guy, just through his experience, lasted the distance.

After the fight Peter comes up to me: "Jackie, I don't want you to accept a nickel for my services." Amateurs are allowed expense money an' a prize, but other than that they're not supposed to accept money. Most of them do — I mean I'm talking about the fight game now. But Peter didn't. He was the only kid I knew in all my career who was a real amateur.

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**George Johnson** is a lifelong resident of Jamaica Plain.

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I'm a coach in semi-professional baseball. I've coached for thirty years and I was a player myself prior to coaching. In sports after your playing days are over, you can either get a rocking chair, a pipe and a

pair of slippers, or you can continue in some other capacity. I decided to become a coach. A lot of people used to tell me, "You're wasting your time in sports. You're not going to get anywhere." I said, "Look, Howard Johnson makes twenty-six flavors because people like different things. Now some of you guys like horses, some of you guys like dogs, some of you like music and some like art. I happen to like sports." And that's why I'm in it. I didn't drink, smoke or gamble but I took a liking to sports.

Now, when I was a youngster, if you went down to the local ballpark there'd be a ball game going on in every corner. You had to get up early in the morning to find a place to get out and play because there was so much interest in baseball. Of course, in those days there was no television, there were no automobiles, there were no drive-in theatres and during Prohibition there were no barrooms. In other words, the youngsters in those days were restricted to certain areas. They didn't have as many things as are available today and had to turn to sports, more or less, if they wanted some action. I didn't turn for that reason. I turned to sports because I liked it plus the fact that the kids where I was born and brought up liked it. And we had some pretty good athletes.

Now, compare that with today. The sportswriters have continually asked me what's my opinion between the kids that I coach today and the kids that I coached thirty years ago. I say there's basically no difference in their ideals or in their mannerisms. The only difference is that they're not into sports as deeply as they were in my day because there's too many diversions. There's too many things for them to do today so they branch off into other areas. To make a point, When I was a kid there was half a dozen pole vaulters in Jamaica Plain and that used to be quite an attraction. Now there hasn't been a pole vaulter in Jamaica Plain for the last twenty years. That's a thing of the past. So there's definitely not the feeling about sports there used to be, but not because they have any dislike for it, it's just because they have more things to get involved in.

Another thing, the kids today are not fan-oriented. Today they want to be part of the program themselves. It's a do-it-yourself generation. Like they play volleyball, they play tennis, they play golf.

They participate themselves personally, whereas in my day, if a kid couldn't make the team, he had to sit in the stands and be a fan. They don't do that no more. They're not going to sit in the stands and watch somebody else enjoy themselves. They're going to get into something that they want to do themselves and they do it. The only real interest that I see in baseball here today is in the Spanish community. They are deeply into baseball and when they had a championship playoff here recently, I was asked to umpire the series, which I did do. I was impressed with their sincerity as compared to the American kids. They dived into their bases head first, they got very temperamental if they didn't make a hit, and they got temperamental if they made an error. This was a throwback — I haven't seen that kind of a performance for many enough years. So the only genuine interest that you can compare with years gone by is the Spanish kids. You can speak to them and they say "*Viva pelota*," which means "Long live baseball." But the sports world is still a strong world, even though there's less and less participation in the form of being a fan. Today, people want to do things themselves.

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**Rose Pitonof Weene** is eighty-four years old. She grew up in Dorchester and presently resides in Brighton.

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I was born in the South End on Orange Street. My family lived there a short while, then moved to South Boston and from there to Dorchester, near the old Dorchester Yacht Club off Freeport Street. The beach was right there and the Freeport Street bathhouse, and I went swimming every day. That's how I became a swimmer. The instructor at the bathhouse — a man named George DiCost — took an interest in me and I started training and swimming distances. When I was twelve I won my first swimming prize and three years later I turned professional after I completed the Boston Lighthouse swim in 1910.

The Lighthouse swim was a long-distance swim from the pier below Charlestown Bridge through Boston Harbor out to the Boston Lighthouse. There had been lots of people that tried it before but all failed and, as far as I know, I was the first person to ever complete





Rose Pitonof Weene,  
circa 1910,  
Boston Harbor.



Rose Pitonof Weene, 1979. Photo by Jean Boughton.

that swim. The problem that you had in swimming around Boston Harbor was that the water was very cold. The day I did the Light, the water temperature was 49 to 54 degrees, and *it was cold*. Well, I had been persuaded to give it a try and so with seven men starting with me, we all dove off the pier in Charlestown. There must of been fifty or sixty boats altogether that were watching and going along with us as we swam. Gradually all the men kept dropping out and even though we were greased, they couldn't stand the cold water. I was the only one that finished.

When the news got back that I had accomplished this, well, there were about 1,000 people gathered around my house to welcome me home. All of a sudden I became very famous. My picture was in all the papers, I was interviewed, and the following week I got this theatrical offer to perform in the Keith vaudeville circuit. For the next six years I was out performing.

My act was part of a larger vaudeville program — a variety show, but I was the headliner and we had jammed houses. I know for a good, good many years I held a record for attendance. They built a tank of water on the stage and I would exhibit some of my strokes and dives. My trainer, Mr. DiCost, was my announcer. He would introduce me and then I would go up on a tower and dive into the water, showing different strokes an' so forth. I played the Keith circuit around Boston, then I played the Orpheum — that was another circuit — and then I left Boston and went to New York. I went to the Fifth Avenue Theatre where I was booked for one week and I stayed for three. When I was in New York I swam 26 miles there, from 26th Street to Steeplechase Pier, Coney Island. I held a record for that and I did it while I was performing at the Fifth Avenue Theatre and, of course, it was a big thing for them. Good publicity. Gradually I kept doing things like that and then in 1912 I went to England.

I was going to try the Channel and I was there a good part of the summer, training every day. I met some nice people there, went to different resorts and became acquainted with some of the sporting people. I didn't swim too great a distance each day. In fact, I never did what you'd say was big training, never going so many miles a day. I would just go out and swim. Swimming just came natural to me, and I was strong and could stand cold water — and that meant a lot. I was ready to start twice but the weather conditions were so bad that they wouldn't let me start. Finally they called it off, but before I came home I swam the Thames River, 16 miles through London. I got quite a bit of publicity by doing that and one of the big leading sportsmen in England saw me off and gave me a lovely medal.

I worked vaudeville from 1910 to 1916, and I really enjoyed it. To me, my acting and swimming were the same thing, only I got paid for swimming on stage and I didn't for the other. My father traveled around with me for a while, acting as my manager, and then I had a woman companion with me all the time. She was really a chaperone and she came over to England with me. 'Course I was very young at the time, starting when I was fifteen years old.

I got pretty good money for those times but not compared to what they get today. In fact, I was very inexperienced as far as the business



end of it went and at the time the Keith's people picked me up, I didn't have an agent. I don't think they gave me as much as I was worth but I couldn't do anything different after I got started and signed a contract. If it had happened in my later years I would really have gone to town with them.

I decided to leave vaudeville because, well, you know, you meet somebody and then you get married. I went to this fraternity dance with some friends of mine and met my husband there. That started it. He was graduating that year as a dentist, and we decided to get married. After I left vaudeville around 1916, it got much bigger and I've thought, if I had kept at it I suppose I would of been into more things. But we just didn't want to postpone our wedding.

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**Elton "Woody" Woodward** is sixty-eight years old and presently resides in Allston.

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The place I played a lot was the old Columbia Theatre. Mr. Sam Cohen — "The Original Amateur Hour" man — ran the show there and had amateur shows seven nights a week at other places around Boston. At one time Cohen had been a comedian at the Old Howard and he would come out and clown around, wearing an old derby hat, a red scarf and a long, trailing black overcoat. But when he was running the amateur shows, he didn't clown around.

On amateur night no contestant went home broke. Each person got one dollar at the end of the show — provided you didn't win the prize, and most prizes in those days (the late 1920s) were five dollars for the first prize, three for second and two for third place.

Now, the Columbia Theatre had vaudeville and that's where some of the amateurs got their tricks. They'd see a guy that was pretty good and then they'd impersonate him on amateur night. That's what Frankie Fontaine did with Sam Cohen. I did imitations of Jolson, Eddie Cantor and George Burns. I did more Eddie Cantor and Al Jolson than George Burns, singing Jolson's favorite song, "Sonny Boy," or Eddie Cantor's, "If You Knew Susie Like I Knew Susie." Now when I try to do them I forget the words.

I would perform two or three nights a week in amateur shows. I

didn't do it every night. I played the Columbia once a week, the National Theatre, the Boston Opera House and at the same time I worked for the National Theatre as a clean-up man. There is one amateur night I especially remember. I was at the old Boston Opera House — out on Huntington Avenue — and we had all done our acts and were walking across the stage to stand in a line-up. Sam Cohen would then walk behind each performer, with the audience applauding for whoever they liked best as he walked from person to person. Well, that night I was standing next to Frankie Fontaine, the comedian, though at the time Frankie wasn't a comedian, he was a singer and he had a good voice. Anyway, it was between him and I as to who was going to get this prize. Well, *I happened to win!*

*Did you work these theatres as a regular performer or as an amateur?*

As an amateur. I never performed professionally until Repeal. Then I joined the AGVA, the American Guild of Variety Artists. After Repeal they started opening up barrooms all over the place and then I had a chance because of my training in neighborhood theatres.

I played around a lot of local bars and worked for two or three years at Mike Kelley's Rainbow Room and Bar. I did a spot upstairs in the Rainbow Room and then downstairs we had a rectangular bar and over in the corner was a small stage. A woman played the piano and I sang songs. I'd sing about three songs for my spot. Then that was it. Sometimes you'd hit a certain atmosphere and they'd clap for you to sing a fourth song, especially if you were doing something they liked. And of course everybody knows that the best honor anybody can get as a performer is a standing ovation. *When they stand up for you, that's . . .* (starts to cry, then pauses and starts over) I can remember, I got a few. Doing Al Jolson numbers and so forth. Boy, there's no — no feeling like a standing ovation, it's something. And I had that, I had a few of them, so I couldn't a been too bad.

I had a hundred and fifty songs written in one of those notebooks — with the binders. A hundred and fifty songs written in there. Alphabetically, with the key marked so the pianist and I wouldn't get started off in the wrong key. If you did start off wrong, you'd joke it off and start in all over again. And sometimes you'd get a standing

ovation for that because you fouled it up but then you came back and straightened it out.

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**Ed Pearl** is in his late 60s. He was brought up in Dorchester and now resides in West Roxbury.

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When I was living in Dorchester on Crescent Avenue there used to be a corner store, Nellie's Bake Shop, where we kids, age category of fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, used to hang around. That streetcorner was our clubhouse more or less. We had no malice towards anyone. Your mother, your aunt or anyone could go in the bakery and there'd be no wisecracks like the kids do today. On a Sunday afternoon we'd just hang around there, so John Nellie, the owner of the bakery, he'd say, "Fellas, get down the basement. Don't interrupt my customers. Please." So he'd invite us down to his basement and, honest to God, he would make us up a whipped cream pie, for the group of us. And there might be twenty-five, thirty of us fellas. He'd give us a couple decks of cards to play cribbage or penny-ante to keep us away from the corner so that customers could make their purchases.



Ed Pearl in front of his house, Halloween 1978. Photo by Jonathan Cooper.

*So you started performing for your friends at the bake shop? Trying out your routines?*

Yeah. Yeah. I was very interested at that time (the late 1920s) in tap dancing and I used to go to the old B. F. Keith Theatre where they had vaudeville and watch the professional hoofers, name Bill "Bo-jangles" Robinson, Jack Donahue, Hal Leroi an' Ray Bolger. I used to go home memorizing their routines and I built my own routine around that. Never took a tap dance lesson! I learned it all on my own. My dad, he was with the Old Castle Square Stock Company. They were very famous in the dramatic field and my mother used to be a front line chorus girl at the old Loew's Orpheum opposite Filene's store now. I more or less had a theatrical background but of the six kids in the family I was the only one that liked show biz. So anyway, I was tap dancing on the streetcorners of Dorchester and I put myself into several amateur shows at the old Metropolitan Theatre, now the Music Hall. I got working with this booker — Jack Davis — performing at various functions and at amateur shows. Needless to say some of the shows were fixed. I'd win the first prize tonight and somebody else will win the first prize the next night — this was at the old Columbia Theatre, or the Gaiety, Walden's Casino, the Park Theatre, the Olympia, all of them.

*How did they arrange that?*

It was part audience participation, but they didn't have applause meters at that time. Tonight it was Eddie Pearl. Tomorrow it was Jerry Dune. It was all fixed.

From there a guy named Buddy Shepard started me off in the clubs, getting me work at the Lido, the Old King Cole, and places like that. I was now about twenty-one, so this was about 1931 to '32. I worked the clubs up till the time I got married to my first wife. I was also working full time as a printer. I disliked the work very strongly but it was a weekly income.

I used to do a show at eight o'clock at the Yenho, and at nine o'clock I'd be over at the Leo on Warrenton Street, and maybe at ten-thirty, I'd go over to the Old King Cole owned by Hap Howard, who's now dead. It would fluctuate, but my wife got disturbed because I



wasn't getting home until about one-thirty in the morning and I had no car to drive. I used the Boston Elevated at the time and she was getting disturbed because I was a frail 115 pounds — due to hoofin.'

Of course, I was in great condition. I used to practice every opportunity I had. Then I met a group at the Dedham American Legion. They had an entertainment unit and I did a song and dance in one of their minstrel shows. We used to work the Granges in various towns like Dedham, Norwood, Natick and Needham. But I was still getting home late at night and momma didn't like it, so I just quit and went into the service. This was 1943 now, World War II. I was with an infantry outfit but I tapdanced at various entertainments at the service clubs, along with people like Mickey Rooney. When I finished the service I came home and my first wife said, "No way. No more. You're heavier now and you can't accept it." But I did one benefit job for a hospital and while I was doing what they call a wing movement I broke my ankle. So then I stopped tapdancing and quit completely. This was in the late '40s, around 1948.

After a short interim I said to my wife, "I'm going to get back into it. I love performing," and that's when I started playing in the Columbia circuit, which included the Old Howard Burlesque Theatre. I met this George Brennen who had seen me performing in a minstrel show way back when I worked in the W.P.A. Brennen said that if I wanted to work, he could get me into the top shows in Boston and he would be my manager. Well, I decided to go ahead and I became a second banana which — in the vernacular of show business — is the junior comedian. Top banana is a head comedian. That's when I met Red Skelton, Rags Ragland, Red Buttons, Redd Foxx, I met them all. And the girls that did the stripping, I met them — Georgia Southern, Lois Gafee, Sherry Burton, Ann Corio. Name 'em and I met 'em. They wouldn't remember me today but I knew them.

I worked at the Old Howard Burlesque Theatre and it was delightful. Every person that you worked with backstage was just a human being. There was no pomp. I worked backstage with Jack Albertson, the guy that starred in "Chico and the Man." He was a singer — "A Pretty Girl Is Like A Melody" — and a handsome young man at the time. And I can remember the old Russells, and the



The Old Howard Burlesque Theatre, Scollay Square.  
Boston Public Library Print Department.



Masked Marvel and old Scollay Square and the Crawford House. I sang with Don Humbert at the Silver Dollar Bar one night when I was in there carousing with the boys. And then we'd go down to Maxie Hamilberg's, it's what they'd now call a gay bar, or to Izzie Ott's on Essex Street. Working in Boston you became acquainted with all the entertainers. It was a small world, a compact world.

*Give me an example of the sort of jokes you would use on stage.*

Okay. Two ladies of the night were walking down past a church and one says to the other, "You know, I haven't been to confession in a long, long time."

"Neither have I," says the other. "Let's go into the church and confess our sins."

They went in to confess their sins, one of them on each side of the confessional, and they related their sins to the priest. The priest says, "Well, for penance and absolution, I'll want you to go out and do the stations." Second one went in and the same thing was related to her, "Go out and do the stations." Well, the Monsignor was kind of curious about them so he's listening at the curb to their conversation when suddenly he says, "Oh my God!" as one girl says to the other, "What kind of penance and absolution did he give you?"

"He told me to go out and do the stations."

"He told me the same thing."

"Well, you do the police and I'll do the fire."

There were never any police raids at the Old Howard while I was there. I mean I was never picked up in a raid and there was no warrant for a raid, say, compared to these X-rated movies shown today in the Combat Zone. There is worse shown there than was every shown at the Old Howard. I mean the girls, yes, they wore a G-string and a bra with little buttoneers on 'em but the only time you would see them in the nude would be backstage when they'd be changing for the next show. Anytime I did work on the boards there I never recall a raid. I never do. There was a close-down one time because of "obscenity and nudity" but not while I was there. And I mean all the jokes were double meaning, you could accept them as a clean joke or as an obscene joke, y' know? It was just good clean humor, and I'll tell you, the ma-

jority of people, not the majority of men but the majority of people — because in later years ladies used to go there as well as men — they came there for the comedians, not the stripteasing. And they had a very strong chorus line, the singers were good — especially Albertson, and in my book, there was no obscenity. No more than would be at one of George White's Folies or Ziegfeld Folies.

I especially enjoyed working with the audience. I love to assert myself and I'm not the least bit shy or bashful. If I could take a microphone and walk around a theatre, I would do the same thing Don De Leo does on Lawrence Welk — I'd sit in the old girl's lap and sing the song to her.

I try and gauge what I'm doing to the mood of the audience. I warm them up. I see what they want — and what they don't want I don't do. Like if I tell a joke and it's a little bit corny and I get no response, I'll revert to another joke. Play the audience. That's the big factor in show biz. I'm not a professional by any means but I've worked with pros and I've got the feeling, had things been different, I would of been a pro.

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**Helen Holliday** is eighty-four years old. She was born in Charlestown and now resides in the South End.

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My grandmother was a slave, but my father was born three years after slavery, I can remember him telling me that. She didn't talk much. The only thing I can remember her saying was, "a li'l piece a bread, a li'l piece a meat, we poor soldiers hafta eat." She saw Lincoln when he came down the road, y' know, during the Civil War. I can remember her saying that. But she didn't talk an', of course, at that age we didn't have sense enough to ask her questions, but I did hear her say that when they were turned out they didn't have nowhere to go and Indians took them in. She came up North and lived on Brown Street in Cambridge, and had to wash, iron an' cook for her living — worked for millionaires.

There ain't much to tell about my family. My mother died when I was four years old and my father raised me. When she died he boarded me with a Mrs. Hunt. Later he married a woman from the

South and I remember when she wrapped my head and braided my hair, because the Swedes across the street used to call me checker-board.

I was born in Charlestown but I can't go back there no more since we been having all this trouble here in Boston. It *don't make sense*. Y' know I never saw no discrimination till now. You see in my day



Helen Holliday in costume, 1915.

white and colored, we all lived the same, you lived next door, I lived next door, we're all friends, that's all I know. Friendly people. If somebody was sick in your house, I'd come over to see what I could do for you. You'd do the same for me. That's the way we lived. You could go downtown and leave the door wide open, nobody would come in your house or steal anything. Yes. I lived in a house with Jews, Italians an' Irish. I came up with the immigrants' children, y' know, and we all went to school together.

I started singing when I was six. God gave me the voice and my father made me study. He said that everybody that came North had to work in service but he wasn't going to have me out working as hard as he had to. And y' know, those people had to work hard. My father came from the South and he worked as a brickmason for the Union Gas and Coal Company, out in Everett. He made good money but later lost it all to Ponzi, the "Boston Swindler." I think he was about fifty-nine when he died. Dropped dead.

I knew how to read music from the fourth grade and, this I can't prove but people I know used to tell me, when I was a kid coming up I was on a platform with Booker T. Washington. I know that second-hand, don't really remember it. The reason I didn't go to college was my father wanted me to go to Hampton Institute in Virginia. He even got a woman to get a trunk for me to get my clothes ready to go. But I didn't want to go down South. All the colored wanted their children to be teachers. Well, I didn't want to be a teacher. I wanted to sing.

I went to the New England Conservatory for a while, then I studied privately. My father wouldn't let me go into show business so I became a professional player and singer. I'd perform at weddings and funerals, and in churches and homes all over Massachusetts. I used to sing in Boston, Winchester, Woburn, Melrose, in rich places, millionaires' homes. You ever heard of Chase and Sanborn? They had a house right up on a hill, after y' leave West Medford. Of course, I haven't been out there for years, because I don't know anybody now, but I'll tell you though, when I sang for white people and they paid me, I had to take that money and buy som'n' to eat. Understand what I mean?

I sang with Roland Hayes when he was in Boston. I sang in



Faneuil Hall, Symphony Hall and Jordan Hall — mostly classical pieces or spirituals. When I started to get press notices from singing in Symphony Hall, people I knew didn't believe it! They'd say, "Oh, Helen, you know somebody down in the papers." They didn't want to give credit or they'd kid me about being "a fly in the milk" — I was the only colored person in the W.P.A. choir.

I got in that around 1936. You had to take an audition and if you get hired you got \$25 for thirteen hours of performing. We sang in all the schools, in all the different churches and in Symphony Hall in 1939. A man named Simpson directed, a graduate from Europe with degrees. He was the finest director — of course I've seen plenty of directors, I've seen Sousa and all those people years ago — but he was a fine director. We sang all oratorios. Oratorios and high-class music. No cheap stuff — Boston didn't care for cheap music years ago. Now Boston's no more cultured than the man in the moon. All the colored folks and white folks do today is shake their behind to ol' cheap music. I don't like to listen to that.

I knew all the old-timers. I sang on a platform with Marcus Garvey from the West Indies. I knew Mr. Trotter, he was one of our greatest men. I knew Paul Robeson. I knew him when he came to sing in Symphony Hall. I always went backstage to shake hands with him. I've heard all the opera singers and used to be able to remember all their names by heart. Can't do it now.

Well, I was in the W.P.A. till I went in the Navy Yard to work. Then during World War II I worked for the U.S.O. Later I worked at the registry, the post office, the tax department and as a secretary for an undertaker. I got everything I wanted when I was working but I didn't make much money. We've just begun to get money since Martin Luther King got in the picture. Now, he didn't do nothing for me 'cause I was sixty-four. I went into the telephone company then for a job and the woman says, "Well, you have a lovely voice for speaking. We'd love to hire you," she says, "but at sixty-five you have to go. That's the rule." I didn't get that job and haven't made a five-cent piece since I was sixty-five, nineteen years ago.

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**Mary Mandia** is seventy-two years old. She was brought up in East Boston and now resides in the South End.

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Granddaddy Bruin lived in the West End in the middle 1800s when the inhabitants were chiefly Irish and a few German people. Later, Poles, Jews and Italians came in because of various conditions in their native countries. When they came here I think they made good citizens because they were hard workers, although it was sad about Boston being so thoroughly snobbish. Bostonians didn't make foreigners welcome, and Irish people particularly were not wanted. I remember my grandfather saying it was difficult for Irishmen to get the kind of position they felt they were worthy of so they would take anything in order to have an honest livelihood. There was no such thing as depending on the city or welfare or any other kind of resource. You earned your way, and you were proud to be able to do that. My granddaddy became a groomsmen. He had a love of horses and, of course, had lived in an area of Ireland where horses were common and he knew them. He worked for Ginn, the publisher of school textbooks, and had the privilege of taking care of his two Arabian horses. Mr. Ginn had other horses but these two were special horses, and on the days when he didn't care to go riding, he would say, "Why don't you take your little one for a ride?" This meant my grandfather would go down home, get my mother and take her up Commonwealth Avenue which, at that time, only ran a short distance because there was water in the area we now call the Back Bay. There was no land there. I heard, for instance, about patients at the Massachusetts General Hospital being brought into the hospital by way of boats coming in from the harbor. They would come up to the Charles Street area on boats and be brought into the emergency section of the hospital, which seems very strange to us nowadays. I grew up with the idea that, "Oh my, Boston must have been primitive!", thinking it must have been fun.

To come back to more recent days, I can remember growing up in East Boston. I graduated from high school there in 1923 and lived there until 1956. Since '56 I've lived right in town in the Back Bay.



My reason for coming in with my mother was because of rent controls going off. We had no choice but to look for another place, and so we moved into St. Germain Street, in the Back Bay. I lived there for twenty years but recently the street was done over into executive suites and, of course, they were far beyond my income. I moved to elderly housing in the South End.

I loved the Back Bay. It's very convenient to Symphony Hall, the library at Copley Square, and I loved walking through the Fenway to get to the Gardner Museum, which was almost my second home. I'd say that perhaps every guard in the place knew me and would miss me if I didn't show up at least once a week. There's a place I'd sit in the outdoor garden and just dream a bit or pretend to read a book. I think Boston has so much in its favor. 'Course tourists love it because of the historic Freedom Trail, and now it's Quincy Market. But I think too there's warmth about Boston. The snobbishness has dwindled away. The Second World War brought a big change in that so many people came from other parts of the country and they helped make Boston into a more democratic, more friendly place.

I especially enjoy Boston's handsome architecture. The Horticultural Building is one of my favorites and sometimes I'll wander down around Milk Street, looking up at roofs, seeing figures and interesting windows. I often wonder if people coming into Boston or even those who live here very often go by a building and never really see it.

I got a job in an office. Nowadays they would say I was a secretary. I wouldn't dare to say that then. I was just a clerk and a stenographer. I became a secretary later as I got more experience and I worked until the end of my sixty-seventh year (1973) as an executive secretary in public relations. I got this by dint of hard work, taking courses and working up the ladder. I worked seventeen years for the Edison Storage Battery Company. It was a one-girl office, and I learnt a great deal about office work and about being a private secretary. Then I worked for fifteen years for a public relations man for American Mutual who later moved to Wakefield. I didn't choose to go there and I resigned, though chiefly because my mother had a stroke and I decided that — rather than send her to a nursing home — I'd

take care of her. I was home then, not working for four years, and the last years since her death — she's dead now sixteen years — I took jobs of lesser degree and less attractive pay, chiefly because I was looking for a job when I was fifty-seven.

Amateur dramatics was also a very important part of my early life. I was in little theatre work for over forty years, belonging to something like four or five different groups from 1923 to 1955. One of my proudest ventures was being in a group that American Mutual used to have. They had a dramatic group which did mostly musical comedies. We did three shows over a period of six years, but the chief one and one of the highlights of my life, was taking part in a two-year fair for servicemen during the war. We did this all around New England and did it on our own time. The man I was secretary to, who was vice-president of public relations, wrote the play, staged it and produced it. I got it in shorthand, then in typing, and then I was in it. I saw it from its early birth, you might say, until the war was over and then we changed the format of the play and it was called, by the way, "Let's Be Friendly." We got citations from the Army, Navy, Coast Guard and we even played on the back deck of the U.S.S. "Wasp" when it was here in Boston one time. It was quite a proud accomplishment. I enjoyed it and I know the servicemen did, God love them. They had a bad time — sometimes we'd be giving them a show and it was the night before they were to embark on an overseas trip. We'd be down at Newport, we'd be up at Portsmouth Navy Yard, we'd be at various army embarkation points. So this was a proud thing to do. It was exhausting, but at that time I felt it was something I had to do besides just knitting for the Red Cross making bandages. 'Course I belonged to the blood bank and all those things, but this was more, this was a person-to-person thing. You watched the faces of these boys and oh, didn't they love these shows. The tunes were from Jerome Kern shows — we used to incorporate all the hits into the little play that we had and I sang and led the group.

I don't know how I ever got myself into those groups because I was extremely shy as a youngster. But I loved the idea of being an actress and if I was going to be an actress, it was sink or swim. So early on I began to get involved in community plays and we had a little

theatre group in East Boston called the East Boston Community Theatre. It began in 1936 when I was thirty and I was the oldest in the group. By the way, I'm still friendly with almost all the members of the group. There were twelve of us in this Orient Heights branch of the theatre and we put on plays around Boston and competed. This was done under the leadership of what they called the Works Progress Administration and our coaches were professional actors and actresses hired by the W.P.A. Most of them were no longer young — again it was a matter of age — but they were people like Jane Powell, who was very famous, and Howard Kimball Young. Our mainstays were a woman who had an Emerson College background and her husband. He did the lighting and stage effects for us, and she did the coaching. We competed with other Boston theatre groups and I was proud when we won three annual awards as the best group.

We always put on one-act plays. One was called *Ambition* and I remember doing that. Another one was called *The Fatal Necklace*. These were all thirty-minute plays which were not too hard to do but enough for an amateur group. During competition, four groups would compete each night with twelve or fourteen groups competing over a two-week period.

This type of activity is what we need today. We wouldn't have the delinquency, the violence, or the holdups if we had young people's minds and energy directed to building up. We were having fun but we were also building up our character. Of course, we had young delinquents in our day but they were more of a bother to their own families than to the whole community. They didn't go in for quite so much violence. TV may have added to the thrill of doing something but my idea of a thrill was to join this drama group where you could get up on stage and be somebody else.



Mary Mandia: photo by Jean Boughton.



# CHAPTER IX

**“NOT SO LONG AGO:  
Oral Histories of Older Bostonians”**

## YESTERDAY AND TODAY



Auto Accident, 1917. New Haven Colony Historical Society. Courtesy of Gates and Tripp.

People often explain the past by way of contrasting it with the present. The comparisons are not always favorable, but there is much that people appreciate about the present, especially those changes which have made life easier. Most people interviewed approved those social programs and technologies that increased their sense of security. These included programs like Social Security, elderly housing, Medicare and Medicaid and inventions such as the telephone, television and radio. None of these were accepted uncritically but no one, for example, wanted to dismantle the Social Security system. Modern technology was welcomed because, as Leo Cardigan points out, it freed people from much of the backbreaking work of the past — the bending over washboards, the tending of coal stoves and the heating of water for Saturday night baths. Leo feels little of the nostalgia for the past evidenced by people in Chapter V.

The changes that people tended to disapprove were those that seemed to undermine their way of life based on the family, neighborhood, and certain traditional values. Changes in the family

have been especially difficult to accept. Joseph Elwood argues that family ties are no longer what they were, so that people can not count on family members being there when they are needed. This increases the elderly's sense of insecurity as there are now fewer people they feel they can rely on for closeness and company.

The breakdown of community is another major concern. Joseph Elwood hints at this when he talks about busing. Many people believed that busing contributed to the breakdown of community, ignoring its deeper-rooted social and economic causes such as redlining, blockbusting, loss of industry and employment, decline of local business districts, and poor quality schools and other services. The generalized fear that resulted from this disintegration, however, led to racial violence and hatred, something both Joseph Elwood and Mary Pistorio describe.

George Graney and Allen Crite discuss other aspects of this problem. Graney notes how South Boston has been affected by an influx of outsiders and Crite discusses the effects of urban redevelopment



especially as it has affected low-income communities. The breakdown of community is a contributing factor to another problem — that of crime. Large numbers of Boston elderly are literally afraid to go out at night and the stories by Kieran Flannery and Gertrude Strother explain why.

Many of the changes the elderly must deal with contribute to a general climate of fear. This makes them wary of change altogether, especially as the elderly are, in social and economic terms, least able to change. What is unusually frightening is that the old way of life has broken down before a clear and acceptable alternative has developed to take its place. Today's new sexual morality, for example, brings discomfort to many old Americans but the old rules also seem inadequate. To many people it seems as though society has lost its mooring because there is no longer any community consensus around which values to live by. Dorothy Campbell reflects on these changes, discussing the problems and opportunities they represent.

What emerges from the interviews is a new attitude towards the problems the elderly are facing. They are no longer content to remain passive and leave things to others. In fact, older Americans are becoming increasingly active, joining such organizations as the Gray Panthers and in Massachusetts, the Association of Older Americans. In these organizations they confront problems, propose solutions and organize to win their demands. Today's elderly refuse to accept the notion that they are a social burden. One eighty-three-year-old activist summed it up by saying: "Retired people can do a great deal of work both for themselves and for the community. There's no reason to stop when you're sixty-five. If you're willing and able, keep going."

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### LEO CARDIGAN

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These old ladies will tell you things were so much better in the old days — well, what was their life like in the old days? Today, they're outside enjoying themselves. *But their mothers never left the kitchen scrub board.* Your grandmother? How much did she get out of the home? Why, women today can be out half the day and still keep a

beautiful home because they have the appliances that let her get her housework accomplished in a short time and get out and enjoy herself.

You've got automobiles — "Oh, nothing like the old autos," they're so full of bullshit in my opinion. (Laughs.) Sure you get lemons today in automobiles. *You always did get lemons in automobiles.* I know, I bought a brand-new Ford with my brother in 1924. Two hundred ninety-five dollars, brand new. But as I was saying, that old Model T, I know what it would do. You never had accidents, no, you didn't because when a Model T hit top speed that was 35, and don't let anybody tell you different. And sure the old cars used to last longer. They'd do about 3,000 miles in the year on the damn things an' that would be it. They'd drive 'em for 50, 75 miles on a Sunday 'n' then they'd just put in the garage for the rest of the week. So sure, they'd last 'em ten years but with one-tenth the mileage that cars have today. I've had my car just one month and it's got 1,100 miles on it. So I do think you people got a better world to face than we did in our day. I think the whole world in every aspect is far better today than it was. For the love of Mike, can't these people remember when they used to have the coal furnace? When you went to bed at nighttime you had to bank that furnace up and the heat dropped. When you got up in the morning you'd have to jump out of bed, run down an' start to poke that furnace to get the heat up. Or the old kitchen stoves. You'd have to build a new fire every morning, so you'd shake it down and after you do that the whole damn house would be full of ashes. (Laughs.) Then they say go back to the "good ol' days." They can have 'em! I'm strickly modern.

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### JOSEPH ELWOOD

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*You were married and raised a family. How has family life changed over the years?*

Well, I don't think the older generation understands the younger one. I know I don't understand my kids. I would say my parents understood us much better.

In my day when anyone of the family was sick or died we took it like the Italians do. They're great family. It's just like if they were all

brothers an' sisters, they're very close-knit. We were that way.

I had first cousins, second cousins, and if they died we'd be expected to visit. If you didn't go, your people would say, "What happened to so-an'-so?" Today that isn't so. I know when my own two girls started growing up I'd say "Let's go down to the wake" and they'd say they weren't interested. Now there's a general feeling that unless it's in the immediate family, people won't bother. My father's sister died and none of my kids went. My brother didn't go, so it even hits my own generation. But to me that would of been sacrilegious, not to go to my father's sister's wake. So you see to me it's different. Maybe to their way of thinking they're doing right, I don't know.

I think family ties are breaking down. And I know the way they get married and the way they live is breaking down. Two years ago this couple moved in near me and they were very nice. They minded their own business, said "Good morning, good night," and didn't bother anybody. Then I saw the moving van up there and they had moved out. I asked my friend Joe what happened to them. He said, "The man came to me and said 'I think we'll hafta leave your apartment. My girlfriend an' I are thinking of getting married and it's too small.'" Well, my mouth fell open, y'know, then Joe tells me, "You're behind times," he says, "they do it all the time." Well, now in my day and age, that would be a scandal. If a girl came up to her mother and said "I'm going to live with my boy friend" — oh geez! I'd hate to tell you what would happen.

I think it comes back to religion. Y'see I'm Catholic, and my mother was the type that sent you to church on Sunday whether you liked it or not. No such thing as not going. And I brought my kids up the same way. Now, the eldest one's married and I don't know if he goes on Sunday, I know his wife does, but I mean he was brought up — on Sunday you went to church. I know a lot of these young kids today don't go, because when I'm going to Mass on Sunday, I see the young kids standing 'round the corner. Now they might of went, I may be wrong, but I know there's a lot that don't. And not only in the Catholic Church, it's every church. So they're losing their faith and they're losing it because there's something perhaps in the Ten Commandments and the church that interferes with their way of thinking. And their

way of thinking is they want to live the life they want, whether it's right or not. But if you belong to any established religion, you can't do that. Y'know what I mean? You'd be going against your own religion.

*Has religion been a force in your life?*

Oh yes, naturally. It prohibits you from doing a lot of things. You know this yourself. 'Course the law of the land prohibits you. I think religion an' the law of the land goes more or less hand in hand.

Now, when I was brought up — they'll deny it, but — I was brought up to believe that unless you're a Catholic you have no chance of going to heaven. You don't hear anything like that now, haven't for years. The Catholic Church has changed.

Just to show you things today, there's a Protestant Episcopal Church down First Street. An' around Thanksgiving time last year they had a church dinner. So this Irish lady goes down there for the dinner and it turns out they had services before they had the banquet. She got there a little early so she went in and heard the service. "You should've went," she said. "I didn't know whether I was in the Catholic Church or not."

"Well," I said, "if I was a little bit early, I would of went myself. What difference does it make? They do just the same things."

People change, y'know, it's like this Jewish fellow Tony, he says, "You know there's two types of Jews. There's orthodox and the unorthodox. The orthodox are strict oldtimers," he said, "they come from the old countries an' they maintain their religion. But the young ones get out in life an' they meet people that are not Jewish. They start out with the idea they're going to be strickly orthodox," he said, "but they change with the people around 'em." So he said, "After a while we became unorthodox. We eat ham an' we do everything that make the orthodox shudder." But you're bound to do that, see. If you lived in a world where there's just your own kind, I imagine there'd be less change. But you can't help it 'cause you're in the world. You're bound to change.

*What sort of changes have you seen happen in Boston?*

Well, of course, in my estimation the color situation is the worst thing. Before this school thing started (busing), colored used to come out to City Point and nobody ever said a thing to 'em. Nobody ever



noticed. They went around the circle here, went to the beaches, used to swim and there wasn't a thing said. There was no trouble as far as I ever seen. Just as soon as this busing began, it's like all hell broke loose. Never saw anything like it. It seems that people would look at them — people who never paid any attention before — and they'd become incensed. And then, of course, what helped it along was these brutal murders. That fellow that they beat to death fishing out there somewhere around Columbia Point. They knifed him and they beat that guy out on Harrison Avenue till he became a piece of jelly. Of course the papers put that in the back pages but when a colored businessman was beaten at City Hall, that was front page. So you see the media they don't treat things fairly. *Either* paper. I buy the *Herald* 'cause I don't like the *Globe*, but I don't think the *Herald's* much better.

*Do you think this busing issue will die down?*

Never. It may die down but I don't think it'll ever pass. It's *even got to me*, I mean, I won't make no issue of it but I don't care for 'em. And it's bad, because you're condemning a whole race. Now in my own philosophy I always say there's good 'n' bad in every race. I mean, it's bad when I hate someone, y'know, you look at a guy — and the guy may be the best fellow in the world — and you say, "He's colored." But today you're afraid he might take out a knife and stab you.

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### MARY PISTORIO

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*Do you think there's as much discrimination today as there used to be?*

I think it's gotten worse. Why we now have all these racial troubles that we didn't used to have because people are anti-busing, and here they're ready to let the Ku Kluxers in, for heaven's sakes. I think that's the worst thing ever. They're elements in the country that try to destroy it, and, to tell you the truth, they done a good job.

Y' know, the Jews were discriminated against at one time, the Irish were at one time — they have to remember they came in here like the colored people and had to work like slaves at one time — and now the blacks. The whole country is made up of mixtures. Every race has



Mary Pistorio: photo by Jean Boughton.

given something to the country. Whether it makes America great or it doesn't I don't know. Maybe it's not a good thing having all these mixtures.

I think the church has failed. I know they're not supposed to interfere with the state but religion represents good in the world, and if anything is wrong, I think they should speak up. I think that had they spoken up years ago we wouldn't have so much racial trouble in this city right now. But they don't want to speak up because people won't go to church and support it, so they keep quite.

You know the church teaches that man is created in the image of God. So then you have all these different races, different colors, different everything. We're all God's people, aren't we? So we shouldn't



hate each other if we're really religious people. But I think it's fear, it's not knowing others that causes hate. That's why I believe in integration. I believe that if the kids, the black and white and Chinese kids, all learned to live together they wouldn't have fear. I was thinking, gee, it you're in a black neighborhood and black schools — and see nothing but black people, and all of a sudden you have to go out into the white man's world to work, you must be scared stiff yourself! So I really, sincerely believe in integration.

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### GEORGE GRANEY

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I think it was September, 1974, when busing hit South Boston and I saw the milling around at the high school day after day, with many of the fellows just staying in the street hooting and shouting. The I heard through some radio programs that the schools were looking for some volunteers in different areas. So in 1975 I went to the School Volunteers in town, let 'em know who I was and that "I might be able to throw some help into that field." They assigned me to South Boston and I took on tutoring in the field of mathematics — algebra I and II and plane geometry. I started off slow with only a couple students but I started to gain momentum as the students got wind that there was this available to them. Both black and white could come in if they wanted any help in the math area.

The first year was sort of a trial run. The next year I tried to pick up the students a little bit quicker in the program. I did this because I found some of the students shy on the basics. I thought they would have had a little more background than they did. I had about nine or ten students, again with both blacks and whites availing themselves of the program. In the next two years rather than going in in October I waited till January. I waited 'cause I thought by this time the high school would know how many were going to be involved. I'll probably do it again this year, we'll see what happens. I heard through word of mouth that I was the only volunteer that South Boston High School received in 1978. Previously they had had language volunteers and



George Graney: photo by Jean Boughton.

volunteers in other areas, but I was the only one, the only one volunteered this year.

Y' know, the attitude of helping your neighbor seems to be gone out the window. If you report incidents to the police you stand a chance of being molested. If the word gets out that you called the police, then you better start boarding up your windows and doors because the kids retaliate. I don't know what has brought it around but something certainly has. We have the same problems in South Boston that they have in Roxbury. The same problems exist. For example, throwing beer cans and bottles in the street. It's done. And I've been in western cities where you wouldn't get away with it. Why, if you threw a bottle you'd be locked up in the local jug. Y' know in our day, if a kid did that, he'd soon get a welcome in the kisser from somebody. Didn't make any difference if it was his parent or the police officer or one of his neighbors. People would straighten him out fast. There was no such thing as throwing bottles and stuff into the streets. Litter on the streets was bad. And the sad part is that there's been no real crackdown.

I think the parents should step a li'l harder. If the parents don't demand respect in the home, then the kid is not going to respect anyone he runs into on the street. If he runs into authority, or into the Clergy, they don't get respect. And where is this going to lead to? We'll have plenty of vandalism and plenty of destruction until it's stopped. But take Johnnie down to his mother and father and say he just busted a window and they just take him in the house, say "See you later." Or, "Did you see him throw it?" Everything is technical now. They won't even take the word of an adult. They won't accept it. They look at the kids and they accept the kid's word. You can talk all you want but whatever Johnnie says, Johnnie is right. Johnnie says "I didn't throw it." Well, Johnnie didn't throw it. So then I've got to pay for the window. I remember in my day if you broke a window, we went down and paid the person and we used to put the window back again. Today, I don't think that exists anymore.

*Is South Boston still a close-knit neighborhood?*

Close-knit? No. I don't think its closely knit any more. No, we've got an influx of many outsiders, many people from outside have come

into the area. I don't think they care one way or the other whether Southie exists or doesn't exist. Don't make any difference to them. They've come in from other sections and moved into the rooming-house areas in here. The only community I would consider well-knit is the North End. It may be all Italian people, but apparently they still act as a knit group. There's been sort of a move over here with the (South Boston) Marshals to try to get things in order. They have tried in a way but I don't know. I think there's too many people that come into the area from outside and just don't give a rap what happens.

All you have to do is look at Broadway at six o'clock at night and you'll see what's happened. Everything'll be shuttered. All except for a very rare store, you'll find 'em all down with shutters.

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### ALLEN R. CRITE

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The black community today doesn't seem to be as cohesive, at least I don't get the sense of cohesiveness, although I might not be in the best position in the world to judge because I'm a bit of a loner. It is a much larger community and it's moved out, I mean the center of it is more or less in the Roxbury area 'round Franklin Park. It has suffered from all kinds of things, but principally from this business of urban renewal or removal, which is really what it is. Large areas of the city where low-income people and blacks lived have suffered from massive amounts of demolition. What we have to understand is that this is something which has affected the country as a whole, not just necessarily the black community, but large numbers of other people. For example, I lived on Dilworth Street, a tiny street about one block long, about twenty-two addresses, sixty-six families and 200 people plus or minus. As a street, it was a community in itself. Everybody knew everybody and got along comfortably in a way, almost like a little village. Well, against our will and without our participation, the houses on this street were demolished bit by bit and people had to move until there's no street left. We were probably the last ones on Dilworth Street to move. That meant that sixty-six families had to



find someplace to live. Sixty-six families were what you might call “redevelopment refugees.” You multiply that street by all the other demolished streets in the city of Boston, and you multiply that by all the streets throughout the whole country, then you’ll find that you have a refugee problem which would dwarf anything in Palestine or Vietnam or the two of them put together. I mean these are real redevelopment refugees. They have the same problems, and the experience is just as traumatic in a way, as what people experience over in other countries. The only difference is that the houses that these people — myself included — lived in were knocked down by bulldozers while other people’s houses were knocked down by bombs. But the results are the same. You ain’t got no house. This kind of thing has a ripple effect. That is, when you get this amount of people wandering around asking “Where are we going to live?” You have the erection of institutions commonly known as housing projects. As a result, you have the growth of institutionalized living and people are confined in these projects almost as effectively as people are confined out in Walpole prison. And, of course, the thing you want to do is get out. So urban renewal has had a disastrous effect upon low-income people and a lot of times you find that after massive demolition nothing happens. For example, up on Dilworth Street, nothing’s been done with that particular land. You can go through large areas of Roxbury and some parts of the South End and you find these great big open spaces. All the people that were there have vanished but nothing’s happened.

Across the street from me is a housing project and like typical housing projects it was designed for the storage of people. But there is a South End project that was designed a little bit differently — Villa Victorias. For one, the people of the community had some input. They wanted to have something to say about its design, its physical equipment, and because the group was largely Hispanic, the architect went down to Puerto Rico to study the color and ideas from that area. In a way, the people fought for Villa Victorias. Because of this they have a sense of ownership and relationship to the area. They don’t feel as though they’ve just been placed there, whereas in other projects, people feel institutionalized, they’re living in something which they have no real relationship to. When I walked through Villa Victorias I no-

ticed a lot of greenery and flowers and I noticed that there was no trash. The area is clean. I was impressed with that and I realized that if people have something to do with where they’re living then it becomes a neighborhood.

The idea of rehabilitation, as far as cities are concerned, may have a certain amount of validity to it, but the execution thereof has almost destroyed whatever benefits we might have been able to perceive. In my opinion, the basis for its execution was wrong. That is, we didn’t take into consideration the fact that we are dealing with lives, dealing with human beings. You can’t simply create neighborhoods. They are things which grow. They are the experiences and lives of the people working together to create one.

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## KIERAN FLANNERY

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You can’t walk the streets of Boston at night now. I can remember the time I used to go out after supper. I would walk by the Sacred Heart Church in Roslindale, go down Hyde Park Avenue to Forest Hills, turn around and then walk home. You could walk that on a pleasant night. Now if you did it you’d get mugged eight times. Nobody dares walk that. Even the police don’t dare patrol it. I’ve also been broken into in West Roxbury several times. The last time I got a severe beating from the fellow that broke in and it’s my firm opinion from talking with people that have been broken into, that three-fourths of the people never report to the police. They don’t report because they’re afraid of retaliation. There have been too many automobile windshields broken by people that reported to the police. The *West Roxbury Transcript* used to list the people whose houses were broken into. Boy, didn’t those people lose windshields! I suppose I’m speaking in a sort of a gloomy vein but if they don’t do something to turn this trend around Boston will really become a ghost city.

*Are they mostly neighborhood kids that are breaking in?*

Definitely.

*What happened when you were robbed?*

My front doorbell started ringing like hell at five minutes of three



in the morning. It rang a long time and then it stopped. I lay there in bed and I was wondering who the hell is calling on me now? Must be some clown or something. So I said, "Aw, to hell with 'em anyway. I'll give 'em a lesson they can talk about," and I called 911 and told the police "I want you to come out and look around. These people may come back again." They said, "Okay, we'll be up in about fifteen minutes." So, anyway, about ten minutes later the side doorbell rang. Somehow I got the idea one of the neighbors that knew me had an accident and he couldn't use his telephone. He choose to come over to my house because I lived alone and therefore he wouldn't wake up a whole household. I went to the side door and while I was just pushing back the extension bolt, geez, this guy pushes open the door and shoves me up against one of those aluminum folding tables and the table broke in half sending me to the floor. Then he picks me up and hits me in the thorax using brass knuckles with prongs on the end of them. In his right hand he has a switchblade knife six inches long. He also had a stone just the shape and size of a medium-grade grapefruit. He was rubbing that against my ear, the idea being to produce a vacuum and break an eardrum. Anyway, he drags me up and down the stairs looking for money. The funny thing was I wear a heart pacer and the heart pacer took over. It keeps my pulse at 73 so I was cognizant of everything. It was just as though I had taken a tranquilizer. I was looking him over to see if I could identify him, and I didn't seem to mind the blows he hit me with, although I had to spend four days in the coronary unit at the Veterans' Hospital following this incident. Well, he marched me upstairs an' downstairs. He wouldn't even let me put my slippers on. I begged him to do that because I have trouble with my feet. Wouldn't let me do that. The third time he got me upstairs he broke a window and was damaging all the furniture. I had to buy two new lamps, a new chair and a new table. I had to repair the radio and television and he also destroyed a hell of a lot of china. I was sure he was trying to produce panic. . . . And he did. Then all of a sudden he went to the front door, turned around and ran right upstairs.

Now, do you remember I told you I called the cops an' told 'em what happened? I called 'em thirteen minutes past three. Well, they

came about three-thirty, but they didn't go into the house. They were outside for ten minutes. Why they didn't come in is beyond me. Well, I had to go out and bring 'em in and like a damn fool I went out in the glare of all the searchlights. There were four cops with drawn revolvers and two were around the side door when I busted out the door. Gee, I was lucky some guy didn't open fire on me.

They bound him over for the Superior Court criminal session and I testified before the grand jury that indicted him. He was indicted on five felonious counts but four days after he broke into my house he broke into a house down near where he lived and terrorized two old ladies. Stole \$90. They said he was a drug addict. Well, in return for pleading guilty, he's at a rehabilitation center out in Bradley, Mass. He's already been out there for six months and he's going to be out there for two years. Then he goes on strick probation for five years. He's eighteen-years-old and this is supposed to rehabilitate him.

What amazed me was the amount of money that the state is spending on him. I heard this story that they've already spent \$3,000 in psychiatric fees for the kid. Meanwhile, my insurance company wouldn't give me anything for the damage to my house. They said I let him in. I can sue him but how the hell can I, the kid's got nothing.

The only bad feature about this whole event was that nobody wanted to get involved in it. I was amazed at the attitude of the people I talked to. See, it was different years ago, there was an entirely different spirit. Today, the population is hiding behind their doors. They come home at five o'clock at night, have their supper, sit down to the television, bolt the goddamn door and they don't go out till the next morning. Years ago, they went out. Maybe they went down to the local barroom, but they went out.

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**Gertrude Strother** is sixty-six years old.  
She has been a lifelong resident of the South End.

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I think Boston has gotten worse. Why, in those parks across the street — in Blackstone Park — they used to have fountains y' know,

and we used to go over and get in there and wade. We used to have a nice time. Now, you hardly see anyone sitting there. They're afraid.

*How about for black people here in Boston? Have things gotten better or worse?*

I don't know. I think things have gotten worse for everyone. Yeah. I think so. 'Course it doesn't bother me much because I don't go out at night. If I'm going to go out, I'll go in the morning or at noon time, something like that. And if no one goes with me I go by myself. But I walk where other people are walking, not along empty streets. I haven't had any trouble so far but I've heard others have — those that go out early in the morning or at night. I heard that the guard was attacked coming in to work. And he was coming in to guard us! (Laughs.)

*Do a lot of people live in fear of being attacked?*

I don't know. Maybe they do. Maybe they don't. I don't really have a terrible fear. I would at night, if I was out there walking by myself. But it isn't just here. It's all over. I was down Dudley Street one evening. I was coming home and it was dark at that time. I heard footsteps behind me and I said to myself, "Those footsteps are keeping right in touch with mine." When they walk like that right behind me I turn around and ask them, "Are you following me?" Well, when I turned around there he was, just reaching for my pocketbook. He turned right back around and he went the other way. After that I couldn't think of anything else but his footsteps.

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### DOROTHY CUTTER CAMPBELL

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*How did people's values and attitudes towards life differ when you were growing up in the early 1900s from what you see today?*

Well, first of all, you must remember that I didn't have a normal childhood. My situation was a little different because when my

mother was alive she was a devout religious woman. She was born in England and even though she became a real American, we had that English training.

We were taught to live by the Golden Rule — to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It's a strange thing, but I think to this day that's the first thing I think of. I might start to do something



Close out sale before the onset of Prohibition, 1919.  
The Boston Public Library Print Department.



and I'll start to think, "Oh, no, that isn't what you should do." Another thing she taught us was that we were good stock, that we came from very fine stock. We were also expected to do things around home — different tasks and duties, and there was never the question of money coming into it. They were just things we had to do.

Now I have four grandsons and I notice how they're being brought up. Everything they do they're paid for. I think that is different, and of course, I don't think you can blame these youngsters — if they're brought up that way — for feeling that money is very important. When we were young we weren't taught that way. We were taught that we had certain duties to perform and that was just part of a household.

We were also expected to find our own recreation, to find things to occupy us. So many of the children today expect their parents to provide things like summer camps — "When are we going away for our vacation?" There wouldn't have been that in my day — that custom is very different. Also back then, if you did something, it didn't take as much for you to have a good time as it does today. It's like the difference between radio and television. In radio you have to use your imagination; in television you sit and watch. I don't think the youngsters today as a whole use their imaginations as much as we did and that's very different.

Another thing I remember is that we were not as dependent on mechanical things. There just weren't as many of them. Perhaps that's the reason you will find quite a few older people that are hardy and husky, we didn't have cars to step into.

*What are some of the ways you've changed in your last seventy-six years?*

My philosophy is the same. When I was a girl growing up I could either cry or laugh. I decided the best thing to do was laugh. Now I do it automatically. I tend to see the ridiculous in situations and look for the funny things. I remember resenting a great many things. Everyone does. Now I have learned that resentment is a form of immaturity. When you stop resenting a thing it doesn't seem half so bad.



Post World War I protest, Boston Common. Boston Public Library Print Department.

I saw an example of this in my husband who had a difficult time. He had a disease that the doctors couldn't figure out and till the day he died he resented things and this made him most unhappy. I can see how so much that he resented couldn't have been avoided.

When we came over to Allston we were different. He was nothing like me — he couldn't speak his mind. He tried to show that he could appreciate things, the good things in life but he didn't like any company and didn't like the telephone to ring. That's why I have no friends. He married me to look out for him. If I sat here at my typewriter with my back to him he was content as long as he could see me. That was what he needed. I wasn't with him when he died. The doctor wouldn't let them call me at midnight. If he woke up he'd ask for Ma. I was Ma to him. My son called me by my name but he call-



ed me Ma. It was a very strange relationship — though many people didn't realize it. But when you make a marriage bargain you stick by it.

I like retirement except that I have been so active in my life that I notice the difference there. I'm an active person and some people are not, you know. They settle right down and that's the end of it. But my mind is active all the time. I'm cursed with a desire to learn. It's just like the other day when we went down to Castle Island. I had to know about Castle Island. I have that kind of a mind.

I think there's too much emphasis today on categories like the "very young" and the "very old." I'm a member of the A.A.R. P. — the retired persons' association — and I was reading an article in their magazine which said a majority of older people resent being pushed into a category like "Senior Citizen." This is a mistake society is making because many older people feel as young as others. They may not be able to do as many things but their mind is alert.

If you hear all the time, "Oh, you're getting along," or "Your arthritis is bothering you," and, "Of course, you can't do things you used to do," well, before long you begin to feel that way. I believe today there are more opportunities for older people. But there's inertia and it has something to do with older people themselves. *They* have to make the effort. They have to change their mental thinking to a certain extent. I believe society's constant emphasis on age does not help them but they have to take the initiative. Remember Mr. W—? When you said "Come next week and bring your friends," he said "I don't

have any friends. If I did I wouldn't come to the senior center." Do you see? He's reaching out to do something, but a great many people are afraid to take a chance. I often think there's something left out of me because I'm not afraid to take chances. You know I'm seventy-six years old and I'm starting to make a change now (moving to an elderly housing site in Newton). That is the reason I wasn't too interested in telling you things about my life. To me that part is all over. Now I'm starting a new life and I'm looking forward to it.

I think that you have to discipline your mind to a certain extent. So what if you can't move as quickly as you could. And if you don't feel as well, then rest a little more. As long as you still have your mind, I really think that if most people would think that way it would help them. Now, this may not be a good philosophy, but, as I say, this just happens to be the philosophy I live by.

I also feel that there are many things that an older person has to be thankful for today. I don't agree with this idea of saying "Well, today is a horrible time. You can't walk out on the streets; somebody'll hit you over the head." Well, if they hit you over the head, then you drop and your troubles are over. (Laughs.) We have compensations. We have TV and radio. And look at Social Security. People didn't have Social Security years ago. They forget these things. I think there's a lot of good today. Of course, I'm an eternal optimist anyway, but I think every age is beautiful as you go along, and all the years have something of beauty in them.



*Top left: Old Scollay Square with Faneuil Hall in the background. Boston Public Library Print Department.*

*Top right: Boston's rail yards 1932. Boston Public Library Print Department.*

*Bottom left: Mayor Curley at a dedication ceremony. Boston Public Library Print Department.*

*Middle: Making a sale at the Fish Pier, 1920s. Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.*

*Bottom right: Listening to an early crystal set. Boston Public Library Print Department.*





# NOT SO LONG AGO:

## Oral Histories of Older Bostonians

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Cover Photos - left to right.

Women in training at Boston Edison, circa 1915.

Outside Martinetti's in the 1930s. The Bostonian Society.

Haymarket area in the 1920s. Boston Public Library Print Department.

"Colored citizen in the West End," circa 1900. The Bostonian Society.

Julia Maria Ruiz. Photo by Jean Boughton.

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**BOSTON COMMUNITY SCHOOLS**

KEVIN H. WHITE, MAYOR

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